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The Quay Brothers

Since the early 1980s, animation has received increasing attention from cinema and television programmers and is gradually being incorporated as a viable genre in film studies. The well-known Polish, Canadian, and Czech-dominated animation traditions have been expanded by a number of innovative British filmmakers, partially as a result of Channel 4's production policy, which provides independents with funding. Two animation filmmakers who have benefitted from this policy are Stephen and Timothy Quay, twins from the United States who settled in England over two decades ago.

The Quays are among the most accomplished animation filmmakers to emerge from under the Channel 4 umbrella. The striking decors and unique puppets they use in their films, their attention to the "liberation of the mistake," and their casual and lingering close-ups combine to create an ingenious alchemy of animated cinema. Watching their films means entering a dream world of visual poetry. In their own words: "Puppet films by their very nature are extremely artificial constructions, even more so depending on what level of 'enchantment' one would wish for them in relation to the subject, and, above all, [depending on] the conceptual mise-en-scène applied." The ambiguity of the world of their puppets has attracted a loyal if select following. Their technical and formal idiosyncracies both harken back to the long Eastern European tradition of adult animation (Jan Lenica, Valerian Borowczyk, Yuri Norstein) and introduce a new quality of poetry to animated cinema. Critics describe the Quays as revivalists, retro stylists, expressionists, absurdists with fetishes already clinically diagnosable in their student films (since lost), or as post-Kafka surrealists with Victorian Gothic spasms. Their works function at a tension beween these and other attributes.

All of these descriptions seem to fit in their best-known animation film, *The Street of Crocodiles*, completed in 1986. The 21-minute color film (their first in 35mm) is based on the eponymous short story by

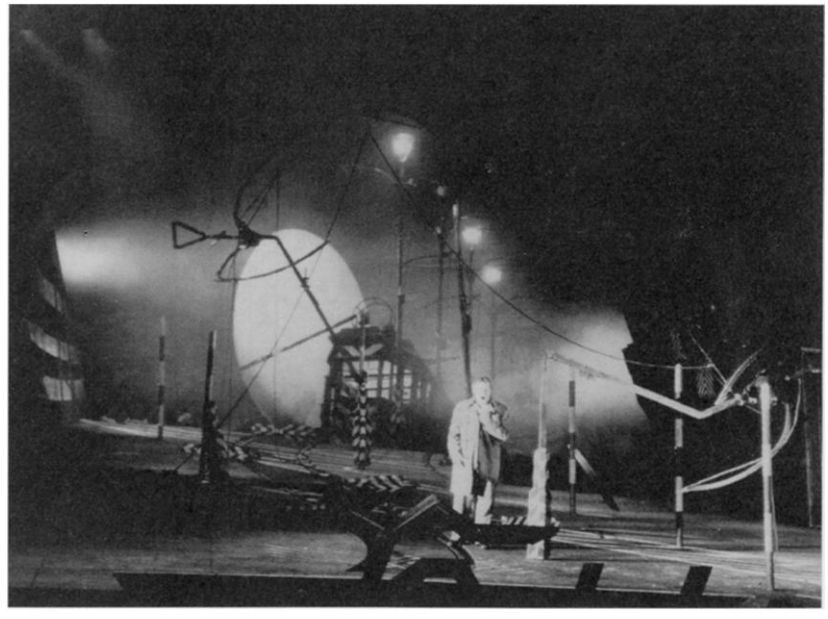
Suzanne H. Buchan

Choreographed Chiaroscuro, Enigmatic and Sublime

Polish author Bruno Schulz, who was murdered by the Nazis in the Drohobycz ghetto. The main figure is a male puppet, and the film records his wanderings through a maze of alleys, mirrors, and dimly lit shop windows. The hero is a fragile construction of the Quays' preferred materials: an oversize head roughly crafted of ravaged plaster, with eyes so liquid that their gaze is set in a permanent state of disorientation and longing; a tailcoat hung over a gaunt frame; and long, delicate hands so expressive that every gesture is poignantly helpless. Sometimes we follow his erring and cautious steps around miniature dust-caked street corners, sometimes the camera assumes his point-of-view, observing a metaphysical (and cinematically self-reflective) reassemblage of a dandelion clock or the resurrection of a cube of ice (shot frame-by-frame, projected in reverse). Then the camera is turned on his eye watching through a portal, another of the mysterious drawers, openings, and holes in the wall which dot the architecture of many a Quay film—windows and passages to subconscious desire.

In addition to their puppet films, the Quays' work encompasses animated shorts, biographical documentaries, and television station breaks (for Channel 4, BBC2, and MTV). They also design sets for theater and opera productions on various European stages (*Mazeppa, A Flea in Her Ear, Love of Three Oranges*; for a Peter Handke piece, *The Hour in Which We Knew Nothing of Each Other,* in Malmö; for a ballet in Copenhagen by choreographer Kim Brandstrup, a collaborator on their feature film; and for a Jonathan Miller production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Almeida Theatre in London, among others). Other commissions include pop videos (their best-known but most un-Quayish collaboration was with Peter Gabriel on the Archimboldo sequence of his "Sledgehammer") and pop promos for Michael Penn and His Name Is Alive.

Numerous commercials are interspersed throughout the Quays' filmography as well. Animation has always held a special attraction for advertising because of its ability to compress ideas and create visual puns. Whether for computers, beer, or salted crackers, the



Quay Brothers' set for production of *Mazeppa*

Stille Nacht III

Quays' unmistakable style bends itself to pecuniary abuse without breaking. Their particular attitude to commissioned film invades some of their other films: in a letter to film critic Michael Atkinson, the Quays reply to his inquiry on the *Stille Nacht* series of related shorts made betwen 1988 and 1993:

> They're all linked by the common thread of Black & White and the belief in oblique salesmanship. *Stille Nacht I* was selling steel wool. *Stille Nacht II* was selling ping-pong balls or socks with one vocation in life. *Stille Nacht III* was trying to sell pre-anamorphized reindeer dining tables with a bullet already fixed in one testicle (which even more accurately & obliquely explains the deformed antlers—documentary hyperbole). Of course none of all this is really apparent, but it gives us the sublime belief that no one is ever looking. And it's the premise we're most comfortable in starting from.

None of the *Stille Nacht* films are directly selling anything; they are either music videos in which the filmmakers have full artistic control (*Stille Nacht I, II,* and *IV*) or a short film which illustrates imagery and mood for the feature film when it was in planning stages (*Stille Nacht III*). But these remarks indicate the Quays' awareness of the unavoidable commercialism inherent in commissioned film, of the ravenous machine which needs its pound of consumer-digestible flesh. The Quays toss it a lump; it wedges itself in the gullet, persistently indigestible.

Watching any Brothers Quay film means entering into a complicity of furtive glances, choreographed shadows, and a melange of artistic, musical, and literary tropes. Theirs is an instantly recognizable style, a shifting composite of chiaroscuro, an assemblage of obscure and fragmented nonnarrative structures. Their works are closer to music than to dialogue, closer to poetry than to literature, closer to interior monologue than to fictional narrative. Whether in art documentaries, animation shorts, or their recent black-and-white feature, *Institute Benjamenta, or This Dream People Call Human Life* (1995), their imagery obeys the enigmatic laws of their idiosyncratic cinematic universe: a synaesthetic palimpsest of music, literature, dance, and architecture; graphic design; the sacred and the occult; pathology and metaphysics. Unencumbered by narrative, the viewer can descend to various levels of bewilderment or enchantment.

In a literary analogy, the Quays' images, like James Joyce's later texts, resist syntactical classification; they belong to a realm of dreams which evades Freudian interpretation—complex and cunning, slyly evasive of the butterfly-pinning which some critics undertake in their dissections of art. The attraction of Joyce is and remains his absolute mastery of the history of literature which he parodied and pastiched; in the Quays' films, a respect for their sources and an inherent modesty is evident in the beauty of their labyrinthine references. Working in their chosen medium, they develop a Bakhtinian ludic principle which evolves from the intimate knowledge and selective appropriation of inspirational material. Joyce achieved expression of preverbal thought with linguistic inventiveness; the Quays manage to do so with the animation of textures and impossible spaces which their camera effortlessly traverses, intimating the secret relationships of spastic machinery, occluded mirrors, and fetishized dust. All this may sound too precious and adoring, but perhaps it is exactly because the Quays stir up mnemonics of sublimated and unconscious obsession, fever dreams, and psychotic moments that their films inspire either ferocious adoration or adamant rejection, depending on whether or not the films are invited to invade our protective consciousness.

The Quays' preferred authors and artists tend to be found in the direction of the cryptic, the lyrical, and the metaphysical: Archimboldo, Lewis Carroll, Franz Kafka, Max Ernst, Michel de Ghelderode, Bruno Schulz, Robert Walser (a Swiss writer known for his microgrammes), Joseph Cornell, or Robert Roussell

(a contemporary of Borges'). They are the retrieved ghosts of exile hovering out of frame in an afterlife of impotence, epiphany, paranoia, and despair. Exile takes on many forms: Prague-born Kafka's double existence; Walser's life took him to Berlin, Paris, and Berne, and eventually to Waldau (a Swiss sanatarium where he spent the last 20 years of his life); others lived a self-imposed inner exile. The Quays' work developed into homages to exiles from these inner regions whose texts are often reduced to simple descriptions of irrelevant or nondescript events which, in their foregrounding, posit uncomfortable questions about the purpose of existence. Their interest in Art Brut or the works of the schizophrenic texts and musical paintings of Adolf Wölfli (a Swiss peasant committed to an institution who rigorously drew, painted, and composed until his death), in Walser's microgrammes and in surrealist imagery all seem to be compacted into the graphic stylization and intricate textures of their films.

The influence of Eastern European culture on the twins' work is pervasive, whether it is the inspiration of animation filmmakers, composers, artists, or writers. After their departure from the United States, a middle European aesthetic seems to have beckoned them into a mysterious locus of literary and poetic fragments, whisps of music, the play of light and morbid textures. Certain films can be considered homages to filmmakers whose work they admire (*The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer*, [1984]), others present their own intuitive and visionary encounters with authors, artists, and composers. The animation filmmakers with whom they feel the deepest affinity are Russians Yuri Norstein (whose 1979 *Tale of Tales* remains one of the masterpieces of animation cinema) and Ladislav Starewicz, whose bug corpse *féeries* transform silent slapstick narrative into enchantment.

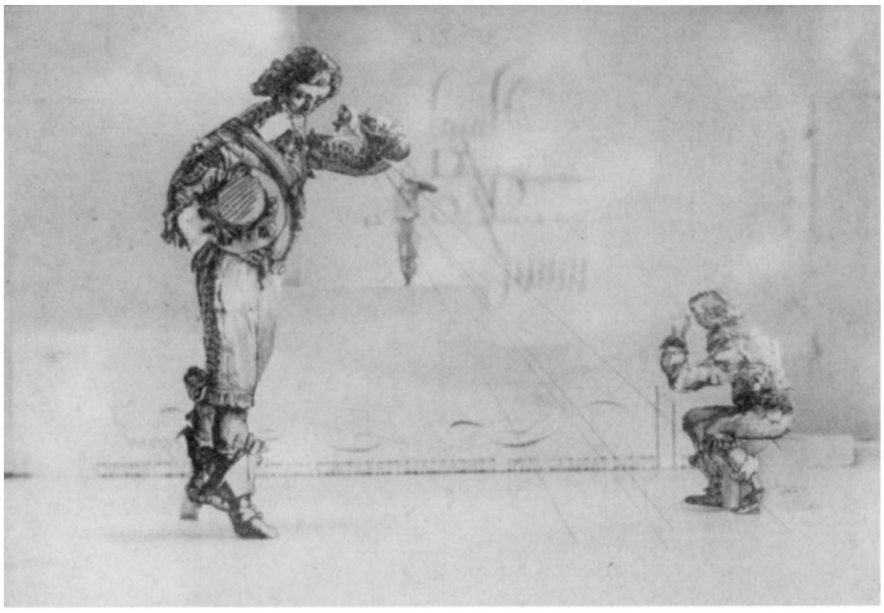
The Quays' amalgamation of the arts is one which vivifies dead or static materials in two ways: the obvious one is their use of the animation technique, which endows non-organic matter with the illusion of movement, an attraction which the form held and holds for artists; the other, far more subtle and disturbing and thereby shifted into the realm of poetry, is the synaesthetic effect of music and textures. Images of dust-cloaked objects pulled out of sleep are induced or accompanied by an underlying music which seems to be the expression and aural motivation of their animation. This combination of the uncanny and the sublime locates the Quays' works in an anachronistic cinematic Sturm and Drang (the Teutonic precursor of English Romanticism), yet it is impure, tainted by Surrealist gestures, an aesthetic of erotic psychopathology, and the hermetic machineries of medieval occult and pre-positivistic science.

Epiphany and Exile

The Quays were born in Norristown, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, in 1947. They enrolled in the Philadelphia College of Art, specializing in illustration, where their artistic predilections were encouraged with materials and excursions into the worlds of art. But it was their first encounters with Eastern European graphics and art-house film that were to provide early inspirational sources for their future films, all of which have been produced and executed in London and its environs. A copy of Kafka's diaries affected their concepts of art; there was also the screening of Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*; and exposure to an exhibit of Polish film, theater, and art posters at the College to excite their visual imaginations. And everywhere was music, music, and more music: Mahler, Sibelius, Bartók, and Janácek, who was later the subject of one of their documentaries for the British Film Institute. For the brothers, these artists created "a poetry of shadowy encounters and almost conspiratorial secretness," and they themselves are fresh conspirators in an ephemeral interdisciplinary genre of the Art of the Repressed.

The brothers' appearance (they have a preference for the shades, textures, and various states of disrepair typical of vintage clothing and early cinema) and the fact that they are identical twins tends to provoke curiosity about their private lives. In a letter to poet and librettist J.D. McLatchy they tongue-in-cheek a dream-list for critics, excerpts of which appeared in an article by McLatchy in *Connoisseur* magazine (April, 1989): "We [were] born of a heavily tainted family, neurasthenic, encephalitic, each one with an atrophied testicle, a sly liking for geese, chicken, etc., pigtails in pillowcases," counterpointing this with a bio that reads like that of anyone raised in 50s America: "No, we grew up sweating with obedience. Our father was a 2nd-class machinist for Philadelphia Electric, our mother an impeccable housewife."

Initially, it can be difficult to tell them apart, especially since in their vocabulary the pronoun "'I" is often subdued by "we." They call each other "Quay" and finish each other's sentences with an uncanny sense of a single mind with two voices (at least when discussing their films). This doesn't stop the conjecture on the origins of their intensely private universe,



De Artificiali Perspectiva or Anamorphosis

it simply makes them more exotic when one considers how far they have departed from the middle-class clichés of America. And it becomes more interesting to know that Philadelphia has a large Jewish expatriate population, which might explain an early infiltration of immigrant European culture into their imaginations. Their own self-imposed exile to a midpoint between modern America and shrouded Eastern European culture is a continuation of a tradition in which identity is a composite of conscious choices.

Their first encounters with film and the kinetic possibilities of frame-by-frame animation began during a course at the PCA, where their student projects included live-action shorts and two cutout animation films. After graduation in 1969, their interest in European graphics brought them to London, where they enrolled in the Royal College of Art, continuing their illustration training and filmmaking: *Der Loop Der Loop, Il Duetto,* and *Palace in Flames*, all animation films, were made there. After graduation the twins returned to Philadelphia for an extended stay, waiting on tables and washing dishes. Book illustration provided little satisfying work; instead of the great European authors, their particular style attracted assignments for science fiction. Then a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts made a sojourn in Holland possible, where they designed book covers. During a visit to London, Keith Griffiths, a classmate from their RCA days, encouraged the Quays to submit a film proposal to the British Film Institute, which was accepted three months later. They moved to London and in 1979 made the prize-winning animation film *Nocturna Artificialia.*

This first post-RCA film foreshadows a number of motives and themes that continue throughout the Quay Brothers' later works: puppets enmeshed in disorienting point-of-view structures; hermetic interiors; elaborate graphics; complex orchestrations of light and shadow; intertextuality; invocations of Eastern European traditions; declarations of homage, and sound tracks that both counterpoint and sustain the imagery. As in the majority of the films, the narrative in *Nocturna Artificialia* is unspectacular, even nonexistent: a solitary figures gazes out of his window, enters the nocturnal street, is transfixed by a passing tram, and suddenly, back in his room, falls from his chair and wakes up. The film is structured in eight sections identified by intertitles (in English, Polish, French, and German). In various states of epiphany and hallucination, the figure's somnambular wanderings are constructed by the formal treatment of the images (camera angles, spatial organization, focus shifts, and dissolves), and by the music and sound track which synthesize the characteristically disturbing tension. *Nocturna Artificialia* (1979), like *Street of Crocodiles* (1986) or *The Comb* (*From the Museums of Sleep*) (1990), deals with shifting levels of consciousness in which visual and temporal shifts are bracketed and further developed by shifts in the musical score and the sound track.

In 1980 the twins founded the Atelier Koninck studio in London together with Keith Griffiths as their producer (the odd name orginates from a Dutch or Belgian beer label; the symmetry of the letters and its graphic design fascinated Griffiths and the brothers). Griffiths' undeviating loyalty to a

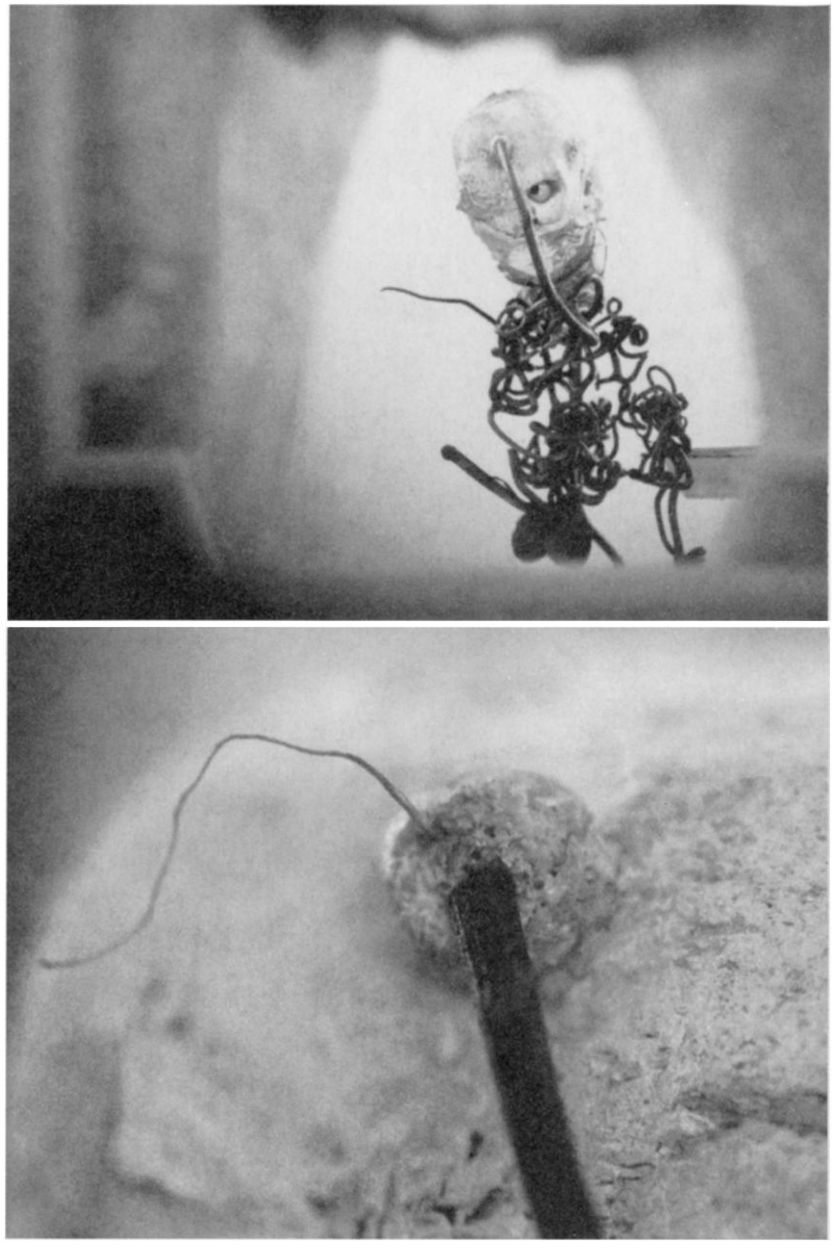
particular cinematic vision is obvious in his own list of productions (it includes Svankmajer's *Faust* and *Conspirators of Pleasure*) and the documentaries he has directed himself.

Griffiths' work with television channelled funding to Atelier Koninck. His dedication as a producer complements the Quays' hermetic work during the filmmaking process: shut up in their studio for over 18 hours a day, they immerse themselves in the miniscule world of puppet sets and armatures which they painstakingly animate frame-by-frame. Stepping out of the cold Dickensian bleakness of the South Bank district of London into the Quays' vast studio, a Baroque watchmaker's mausoleum which they call their living room, one enters a tactile atmosphere saturated with Kraft-Ebbing and Lenica, Kafka and Archimboldo, and populated by various objects left on their doorstep by admirers (a mummified pair of mice in wedding attire, bedded on the half-shell of an ostrich egg; a cone-shaped rat, retrieved long-dead and dessicated from the intersection of two slanting walls). Suspended by strings or collecting their own unique dust on shelves, the *generatio aequivoca* in an undead slumber, past and future constructions assembled out of crumbling pentimento fragments salvaged from various flea markets seem to lie waiting for their opportunity to slip into one of the films. Commodification of useless and alienated objects is part of the Quays' charm. There are moments when the time spent in their working space is almost indistinguishable from the experience of watching their films.

Calligraphing Space: Formal Aspects

Perhaps because of their work as illustrators, the Quays' films pay great attention to mise-en-scène and the marginal, and are more associative than narrative:

> We demand that the decors act as poetic vessels and be foregrounded as much as the puppets themselves. In fact we ask of our machines and objects to act as much if not more than the puppets. . . . As for what is called the scenario: at most we have only a limited musical sense of its trajectory, and we tend to be permanently open to vast uncertainties, mistakes, disorientations, as though lying in wait to trap the slightest fugitive "encounter."

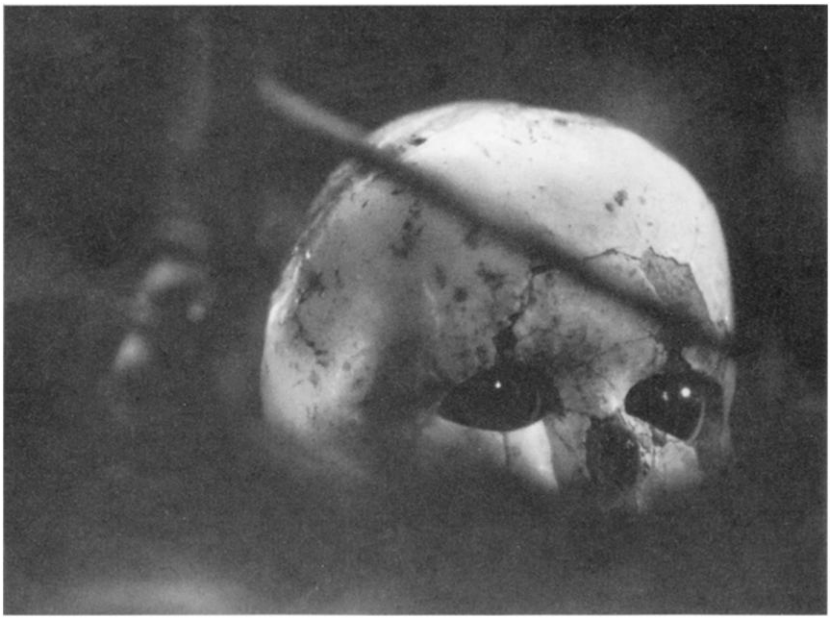


Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies

An example of their inventive cinematic graphic stylization is *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* (1987), a 14-minute film whose scenario was inspired by Fragonard's engraving *Le Verrou.* The film is a composition of camera pans back and forth between a sick room and another space whose white classicism is invaded by stark calligraphic lines which climb walls and traverse floors. The graphic ornaments escape the fixity of paper and course through the decors which they also define. Instead of embellishing the visual image, they become, as the Quays describe it, self-reflective "poetic vessels," drawing attention to the potential of animation to free the line and the geometric object from their static destinies.

One of *Rehearsals'* puppets—a pitted and deformed head perched on a tangle of metal wire with a single malicious eye fixed in a deranged stare—has a single long and coarse black hair protruding out of a soft mole on its forehead. Repelling enough in itself, but then in repeated close-ups a stick prods the mole in a circular motion which, after the second or third sequence, begins to have a physical effect on (this) viewer. The sense of discomfort and revulsion which this isolated gesture evokes is part of the film's fascination: both drawn to the neurotic repetition and relieved that it takes place on screen but not on one's own body, the viewer is freed to gaze at another's obsessive behavior. After a while, editing begins to construct relations between these almost unbearable, disembodied close-ups. In another set, two puppets, strangely reminiscent in stature and gesture of the filmmakers themselves, one prone and pale, the other seated in an anodyne posture of sick-bed duty, wait—for what? Perhaps for the illness to run its (fatal?) course, perhaps not.

The tension is relieved by the Beckettesque absurdity of the sitting puppet, who scratches his head in the same gesture as the wire homunculus's mole is prodded. It is precisely in this and other mechanistic repetitions that the "action" of the Quays' elliptic narrative takes place. And underlying the entire film, whispered monologues on the sound track hint at seduction or at disparate and disconnected interior monologues.



The Comb

Technique and Liberation of the Mistake

The Quays work almost exclusively in 3D animation; puppets, decors, and *objets trouvés* are initiated in the cinematic metamorphosis which is the technique's quintessence. They are animated, brought to life, embedded in elliptical narratives and musical structures. The inherent possibilities of a form that enables the transcending of natural physical laws such as gravity, perspective, and the strictures of real time make film an obvious choice for artists interested in various concepts of perception, vision and its subversion,and the preverbal world of dream and inner voice.

Developments in technique, rhythm, and narrative complexity are found throughout the Quays' body of work, but except for a refinement in animating technique (the first films have the jittery pans which plague many animation films, but which are also a particular

aesthetic of the animated form), their visual and musical quality is almost constant. Occasional formal irregularities have never irritated the Quays. On the contrary, in the process of shooting they let themselves be inspired by these "mistakes," and go on to develop these errors into exactly what identifies their films: a lingering shot of an object or movement which first appeared inconsequential but is gradually transformed into the scene's central motive.

The conscious eschewal of continuous space and a shifting of focus is further complicated by the Quays' use of macro lenses, which provide virtually no depth of field. This results in a disorienting, staggered camera movement which, because it is not the result of a completed cut, draws attention to the single-frame process of dimensional animation. In most cases, the fast pan functions to disorient spatially, because the order and visual points of reference have often changed after the camera comes to rest. The lack of a full break between images, which is usually effected by a hard cut, results in an semi-elliptical connection between the initial image and the final one. All this contributes to a disconnected yet strangely coherent space seemingly free of established physical laws of reality.

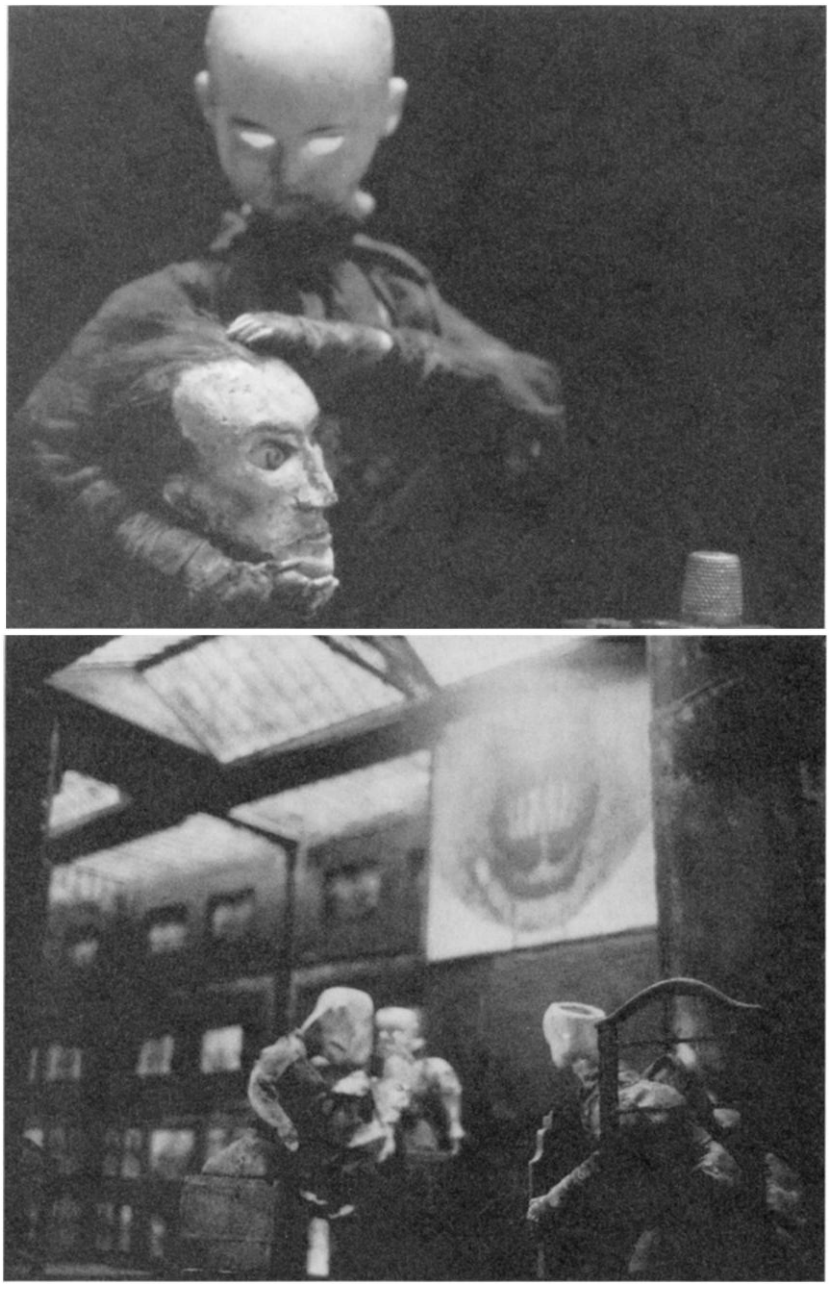
Another technique of the Quays, which I call a fast pan shift (a pan being generally a movement within a visually established and continuous diegetic space), functions to establish different physical laws of vision in the animated realm. This is because of its unnatural speed of movement in comparison to more familiar, "invisible" camera movements which construct the fictional "reality" of most narrative. This results in a flicker effect and in rapid shifts which challenge concentration on planes of focus, making it almost physically impossible to focus on an object passing through the frame in order to implicate it (as it seems to suggest it should be) in the rest of the images. The Quays' use of these techniques contributes to their particular architecture and their fluidity of space, drawing attention to its intentional fabrication. These and other complex and disorienting effects happen so quickly that there is no time to think about their painstaking evolution.

The Quays' consistent use of focus-pull in, for instance, *The Comb* defines their concept of spatial coherence. The film's diegetic world, a dreamscape of a sleeping woman—shot in live-action sequences which punctuate the film—is a melange of ladders, anamorphic landscapes, and painted backgrounds seamlessly constructed into a credible arrangement. A moving focal plane is implemented in uncanny point-of-view shots and helps the spatial transitions between dreamer and dream world. The Quays also use what they term "retroactive cutting": "We like to go the opposite way, do the close-up, where you feel disorganized, so you come back and see an arm." This reversal of expository conventions of narrative continuity editing is another effect which serves to disorient, or to draw attention to the states of mind which are evoked, rather than obeying the conventions of seamless narrative.

Surrealism and Its Discontents

When asked about their own formal affinities, the Quays replied they feel closer to Dovzhenko than to Eisenstein. Their montage choices, perhaps ideally more similar to Dovzhenko's sensuality, are linked to the Surrealist process of artistic creation. The Quays operate on conscious levels, but their earlier works in particular seem to bear traces of the Surrealists' inspiration through the unconscious. Working on impulse rather than with carefully plotted narrative layouts or storyboards (which they would use "only at gun point"), the Quays create at an intersection of Dovzhenko's emotional editing in silent films, of Eisenstein's intellectual and associative montage, and of P. Adam Sitney's description of "the surrealist hero [who] has chosen to live in the imaginative realm of displacement, fantasy, and mythopoesis."

The earlier films of Stephen and Timothy Quay are also reminiscent of Surrealist cinema in their juxtaposition of image and sound. Their poetic syntax overrides to some degree the Surrealist insistence on disorder and disorientation, but the films contain enough Surrealistic references that critics tend to identify them as such. Yet unlike the Surrealists, who are criticized by some as being ignorant of the cinematic grammar and syntax which forms the essence of editing, the Quays' films are often based on literary texts (Walser's *Dornröschen,* the Gilgamesh epic, or Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*) and develop a form of narrative. Unlike the Surrealists' use of automatic writing, which they insisted must evolve from chance and unconscious impulse, the Quays' work with materials forces a tangible perception of the conscious processes involved in filmmaking, and relieves them somewhat of their reputation as Neo-Surrealists—a label they, incidentally, reject. Their application of familiar forms of cinematic artistic expression—music,



Street of Crocodiles

image composition, continuity editing, formalist montage, the puppet film and all its parameters—to works with ubiquitous Surrealist references is itself an indication of the ephemeral quality of the definition of Surrealist. The trajectory of the Quays' imagery is increasingly defined by their graphic abilities as illustrators and set designers (their name is usually under a long list of functions in the film credits, ranging from decors to lighting and animation).

Limits of Reality and Schulz's "generatio aequivoca"

The Quays have a predilection for rootless, abandoned materials. Their continuation of the *trompe-l'oeil* tradition of Max Ernst's metamorphoses, their use of dead matter mocking human form, and their underlining of the autonomy of material from human laws all seem intertwined in the challenge to animate and sensualize deadness. Puppet animation is by default associated with folklore traditions, investing puppets with an anachronistic distance. The Quays circumscribe the limitations of puppet theater by making direct reference to the materialness of their constructions. Armatures are visible, like tortured and crushed bones tweaking out of the crumbling fabrics which encase them, or are reduced to a single body part—a head, an eye. Close-ups, wipes, fades, and pans further alienate the puppets from the openness of a stage set, and we can enter into the privileged point-of-view of a figure which is impossible in a staged theater situation. And the concept of automatization treated by many authors—E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," E.A. Poe's marvellous and psychotic transformations, Schulz's short stories, or Walser's automatons—is found in Quay films as well. The experiences of the private moments of slumbering materials suspended in time is a theme throughout their work; and the concept of the automaton is of major importance in the new script the Quays are currently developing.

In each film they make, there is a practical division of labor: one of the brothers is responsible for the puppets, meticulously builds and animates them, the other operates the camera and arranges lighting (their roles vary from film to film). The sets themselves evolve in discussions at the other end of the studio, more often than not accompanied by a glass of wine and the omnipresent music which transforms the studio itself into the decor of one of their films.These sets are often included in displays at festivals, giving audiences the opportunity to see the relation between the screen world and the mechanical and technical investment required for puppet animation. For the Quays, these displays are not representative of the films:

> They are in no way meant to be seen as finished objects when seen in isolation . . . out of

the natural context of the very films themselves. They lack entirely the further additional multiple potentials of sound, music, lighting, the choreography of rhythm and movement of puppets or objects through framing; and lastly, the interpretative mise-en-scène applied to all these. Retroactively, they are a reminder of the static imitation of the film's otherwise natural evanescent flux.

When their puppet figures are used to portray artists, as is the case with the television-commissioned documentaries and biographies, the historical figures are enhanced with gravity and humor by the puppet constructions which represent them, and by their "Mickey-mousing" to music. In *Leos Janácek: Intimate Excursions* (1983), for instance, the composite of a head made of an oversize bent portrait photograph and a floppy puppet body confronts us with an oddly burlesque death mask effect, yet also suggests clues to the inner life of the composer.

The porcelain dolls' heads which the Quays also use transport metaphoric and literary allusions, evoking writings from Descartes to Hoffmann, embellishing the fairy-tale basis of puppet figures; this is the secret life of materials on screen. A serial number imprinted on the back of a translucent porcelain seamstress's head in *Street of Crocodiles*, for instance, alludes to Nazi concentration camp tattoos and the brutality of Schulz's murder. In an uncanny reversal of disconcerting density, we understand what it is to be trapped in a sawdust and cloth physicality, and become privy to its sinister and sensual potential.

In their work with anonymous objects, the Quays demand that their machines and objects act as much if not more than the puppets: "[you] accept their very physicalities palpably as objectified dream or as music, and it's at this point that you can convey compound zones, darker ranges, deeper possibilities as well as perpetuate other narratives, other secret liberties." The visible constructedness of the mise-en-scène relaxes expectations of a cinematic equivalent of human life form, allowing metaphor and analogy to enter into the "otherness" of the objects. This is a cinematic expression of Bruno Schulz's *generatio aequivoca*, "a species of beings only half organic, a kind of psuedo-fauna the result of a fantastic fermentation of matter." The Quays' puppets become by extension their automatons, silently performing the routines and repetitions of daily life as materials manipulated and animated by the hands of their makers instead of a pen or a paintbrush.

The Conspiratorial Climate of Music

Music permeates a Quay interview and in the Koninck studio, music is folded into every gesture and reply. The studio's rafters are imbued with sulking and melodious compositions from various, predominantly Polish composers, with madrigals, violin sonatas, and avant-garde instrumentals. The Quays' relationship with Polish composer Leszek Jankowski is particularly important. It dates back to 1981, when they first heard his music and contacted him for possible cooperation on a future project. Working on both sides through translators, they sustained an exchange of letters over the following four years. When the Schulz project for *Street of Crocodiles* was approved, Jankowski (also an admirer of Schulz) began sending the Quays fragments of compositions he had written for them. "Thus we had all the music prior to the actual filming . . . the film grew from its interior outwards, with music more often than not being at the very core of the sequence, in particular, the film's finale: the elegant broken 'Automaton's Waltz' which had Leszek reading the closing lines of the Bruno Schulz story."

The Quays describe the initial work of image and music on this film thus: "We had already animated some of the sequences, then the music arrived and then we'd tighten or shorten or lengthen the scenes so that they would fit. We never said, Write a sequence for this, we said, Write six 30-second pieces; it was as vague as that. In a way it was such a vague thing [for Jankowski] to write; he'd never really done it before."

An analysis of the editing for most Quay films, including the early music documentaries, brings to mind the notes in a musical score. A combination of conventional editing and complex montage sequences seems to follow musical laws (for these are the moments in which the music seems to offer some guidance through the animated realm) and is an element of the alchemy of their films; the "liquid space" which, the Quays say, contributes to "the very slow accretion of layers which combine to line and perpetuate one another. For us, [Jankowski's] music offered a conspiratorial climate in keeping with the Schulzian universe which effectively suspended time and allowed the music to secretly contaminate the images, the images to contaminate the music." With regard to their editing process, the Quays think their impulse is much more a lyrical journey . . . the metaphors are always musical.

Throughout their collaboration, Jankowski's music has greatly inspired the Quays; the climate allowing reciprocal contamination of image and music results in "the music to be 'seen' and the images 'heard.'" This is a reference to visual music as described by Hans Richter and other "absolute filmmakers" of the experimental and avant-garde film movement that began in Germany in the 20s, who also worked with animated film form. In the Quays' *Igor—The Paris Years chez Pleyel* (1982), a biographical study of Stravinsky, parts of flashing neon signs light up in sequence to finally form a strangely familiar image—the curves and forms are reminiscent of Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1921-24), an avant-garde "absolute" film which itself was based on a detailed score of abstract geometric forms.

The almost complete lack of spoken dialogue in the Quays' animated works (which, if on the sound track at all, is muffled or whispered so quietly as to be unintelligible, even discordant, indicating only some obscure presence) allows or even forces one to give oneself entirely up to the images and to the music. The Quays: "For us, dialogue is no more important than light or sound—it is one of the elements you can play with—the trouble is, it is always the most obvious. In Hollywood, dialogue is preeminent; the script comes first . . . that gets the funding. And for us it is always the other way around." In *The Comb*, the film is arranged in what the Quays call a "dream syntax," with analogous gestures and cutting between the live action and animation sequences. The erratic movement of the sleeping woman's twitching finger is repeated by a puppet's overly long middle finger, and careful crosscutting between these shots suggests a relation between the sleeper and the puppet. Here the language is a murmer, functioning like an aural breeze of the sleeper's disturbances.

The Koninck studio is filled with bookshelves weighted down by antiquaria and paperbacks whose covers have been appropriated by the twins' initial graphic vocation. Leafing through them one finds again and again references to early optical studies and kabbalistic science: *Magica naturalis*, for example, a Counter-Enlightenment metaphysical concept of vision, perception, and art which informs the metamorphoses and occluded vision the Quays conjure with their camera work. Their *De Artificiali Perspectiva or Anamorphosis* (1990), a film-historical documentary on the eponymous technique of subverting vision, deals with these concepts. Perhaps the cinema, and especially the metaphysical potential of animation film, is the art form most able to investigate these 16th- and 17th-century magical and occult investigations.

Some visionaries of current cinema, from Kusturica to Ruiz and von Trier, incorporate romantic, even kitschy, imagery and animated sequences in their films to express these inner sensibilities. The fantastic is no longer decorative, but has become a serious aesthetic means to express a visual correlation to the dissolving borders between reality and virtuality, between natural physical laws and the increasingly seamless inclusion of fantasy as a given in fictional realism.

The Quays understand the fantastic in terms of the sublime or the marvellous as Todorov defines it. "If you're thrown too much into the fantasic, so that you lose all handhold," they say, "then it defeats you. In a sense if you create a fantastic world, like in the *Gilgamesh* film, it is important to establish that [the puppet] has certain functions within that world, so that when further elements of the marvellous happen, you can then move up to that plane, then back off, and then come back down."

Institute Benjamenta: Through the Live Action Looking Glass

In 1995 the Quay Brothers completed their first full-length, live-action feature. *Institute Benjamenta, or This Dream People Call Human Life* received awards at festivals (Locarno and Stockholm), and was released throughout the world. The visual mastery achieved in their animation films is continued in the life-size decors, in the labyrinthian narrative, and in the aesthetic composition within the frame of this live-action film. *Institute Benjamenta* is shot in black and white, enhancing the subtlety of its chiaroscuro effects, and with an animated choreography of light and stark graphics which disorient and captivate audiences. The few animated scenes within the film are isolated interludes, expressions of subjective vision and poetic metaphor. They contribute to the dream-like quality of a work which is, like the Quays' animation films, uncannily free from the laws of time and space.

As with their short films, *Institute Benjamenta* draws its inspiration from fragments and whispers of literary material. The film places a hermetic and ephemeral Baroque cloak over the novella "Jakob von Gunten" and other texts by Robert Walser. The film

Photograph Walser Archive, Zurich

Robert Walser, ca. 1909.

knots a tapestry of myth, choreography, and symbolic and literary reference, located in what critic Jonathan Romney describes as "the fossilized phantom Europe that is the true location of the Quays' fictions." Asked about their choice to make a film with live actors, the Quays replied, "It just seemed time to try a new form—just as a composer might think, 'Now it's time to do a symphony.'" It is no coincidence that Walser's writing is often described as being full of musical analogies and metaphors. The stars and sun sing, a room possesses a precious tone, a girl's gentleness is like a stream of notes; he compared nights to black sounds, someone enjoys his slowness like a melody or a city affects him like a symphony. In Walser's texts—in his novels, essays, and microgrammes—the compositions and dialogues are reminiscent of musical inspirations, a quality that Walser himself often mentioned.

The images are choreographed to Walser's musical language. The Quays speak of dance "as a possibility to eliminate dialogue—and why *can't* a feature film, if carefully done, do the same?" Kim Brandstrup choreographed the students and their forks with a equal intensity (see photo, page 14). The six-week production schedule was itself a choreography of objects, actors, and all involved.

The Quays chose to work with what they call a "lateral heirarchy" of cinematic formal aspects; unlike script- and narrative-driven conventional film, *Institute Benjamenta* "cast" the Institute itself before the actors.

> We wanted the film to move more in the direction of the fable or the fairy tale (or at least a notion of it), as Walser did obliquely. He didn't walk in the front door, he—so to speak—came through the roof. So, in order to score something of, as Walser called it, the "senseless but all the same meaningful 'fairy tale,'" we started by casting the decor as the main actor. We felt that the essential "mysterium" of the film should be the Institute itself, as though it had its own inner life and former existences which seemed to dream upon its inhabitants, and exert its own conspiratorial spell and undertows. That time and space should be ambiguous, that the locale of the film would be less geographical than spiritual, all to score that particularly Walserian half-waking, half-sleeping "world in between." And, since we've always maintained a belief in the illogical . . . the irrational . . . and the obliqueness of poetry, we don't think exclusively in terms of narrative, but also the "parentheses" that lie hidden behind the narrative.

In a gesture of loyalty to their puppet film aesthetics, the Quays remark that they "treated the actors with as much respect as we treated our puppets."

Institute Benjamenta

Music from Carl Orff and a lilting riddle divined from a Bavarian folk tale are the aural foreshadowings which accompany the film's exquisitely stylized opening credit graphics and fleeting animated sequences. At dusk, a slightly built man approaches a door, pulls at his heavily starched, blindingly white collar, and hesitatingly knocks. Jakob von Gunten (Mark Rylance, from Prospero's Books and Angels and Insects), a delicate man who has escaped his upper-class origins and wants "to be of use to someone in this life," enters the Institute Benjamenta, a school for domestics, and embarks on a dream-like voyage through an eerie, metaphysical fairy-tale world, embodied by the Institute itself.

Assisted by her devoted and enigmatic model student Kraus (Daniel Smith), doe-eyed, Victorian-clad Fräulein Lisa Benjamenta (ephemeral Alice Krige, the Borg Queen of recent *Star Trek: First Contact* fame) runs the Institute with her phlegmatic older brother (Fassbinder regular Gottfried John), guiding her students through a lesson which is always the same: "Practice-scenes-from-life"—mechanical repetition, self-castigation, and submission. It is a curriculum of cryptic signs, absurd gestures, and unbearable detail. Jakob's arrival arouses in Herr Benjamenta a haunting hope of a savior, a hope that is rendered more complex by the film's discrete homoerotic undertones. The fragmented and obscure relationships between brother and sister and Kraus are disrupted by Jakob's arrival. His behavior isolates him from the other students; fleeting moments of stifled confession and unarticulated emotion initiate a series of sensual epiphanies in Lisa. Jakob has awakened Walser's Sleeping Beauty from the loveless existence from which she realizes there is no escape. The hermetic and perhaps incestuous relationship between brother and sister is interrupted by Jakob's presence and his effect on them both.

A sublime foreboding haunts and mystifies the Institute and its inhabitants. Bound up in its suffocating atmosphere, Lisa succumbs to an increasingly horrific recognition of something unspeakable which gnaws at her until she can no longer bear it: a longing born of unfulfilled desire. Lisa's inner decline climaxes in her decision to stop living; she is "dying from those who could have seen and held me . . . dying from the emptiness of cautious and clever people." After a confession to Jakob, sealed with a fleeting brush of her lips on his, she expires. On her bier, while her brother bends in grief over her pale body, Lisa's eyes open once and, unseen by all, sparkle into the camera, a gaze directed at Jakob. She is borne through the Institute's inner chambers, deposited there by her students. Herr Benjamenta leaves the Institute behind and, with Jakob, walks off surrounded by floating flakes in a snowball-glass winter vision. Kraus remains behind, guardian of the fishbowl, the riddle, and the sleeping beauty. He is the constant presence who guarantees that rituals and fossils like the Institute will never fully expire.

Stunning light design endows this film with its ethereal quality. Brief, almost invisible animated sequences punctuate the film and accentuate its fairy-tale environment, suspending time; they are minute and discrete visualizations, reminders of a metaphysical life which slumbers in the Institute. Like Lisa

Benjamenta, the images are simultaneously fragile and immortal. The film evades a postmodern context or interpretation, and its epiphanic moments and dreamscapes provide a momentary orientation, but are themselves even greater enigmas within the film's poetic fabric.

In isolation, the film's leitmotifs and iconography are disturbingly beautiful: totemistic cloven hoofs, deer antlers, flowing waters; in their sublimation and appropriation in a world of suppressed Victorian eroticism, they become obsessive, dark, and ambiguous. Remnants of the Quays wanderings in Walser's Swiss heimat and their Bavarian forays seep into the film's stylization. Lisa's cane, with which she guides and masters her students, is tipped with a tiny hoof (initially the Quays thought to give her cloven shoes); in a close-up at the beginning of the film, when Jakob is brought to Herr Benjamenta's office, we see a hooved foot surreptitiously drawn back out of sight; and later we glimpse Herr Benjamenta out of focus, acting out rutting movements in front of a steam-streaked mirror, with a majestic set of antlers in his arms. And the snowflakes: Walser himself died on Christmas Day during one of his walks in the forest; the forensic photograph shows him face-up on the snow with one arm flung out, his eyes half-open in a frigid, unquiet slumber.

Their recent excursion into feature film with this and future live-action films is by no means an indication of a move away from animation: the Quay Brothers intend to explore the potential hidden in the combination of these cinematic techniques. The formal possibilities inherent in animation can lend visualisation to the dreams, inner vision, and narrative meanderings which are essential components of their cinematic transformations of text, poetry, and imagination. Unlike a novel or poem, whose foundation is the spoken word, the visual potential of cinema allows the bypassing of symbolic written language and the use instead of images with a direct relation to reality. The Quays' films are a collection of original and inspired visual images independent of the viewer's own encounters with the images' source references; the sum total of their films is an excursion into a conjured space of imagination, history, graphics, and pre-Freudian psychology. Most of their films resist narrative interpretation, but their dream-ridden imagery tempts psychoanalytic-theoretical analysis: the automata go through their absurd and obsessive routines; the carefully tended molds and stratifications of dust are tropes which infiltrate the film's rhythm; and the camera's selective shots and focal shifts are a guide through the architectural impossibilities of subconscious desire. The films stage what otherwise exists only in the form of symbolic language as cryptic or microscript manuscripts, as drawings, or music, perhaps the most mathematical art. The Quays' films give form and substance to memory, inner states, obsession, and thwarted desire.

Their next film project is a live-action feature, *The Mechanical Infanta.* "We project a narrative that a normal automaton can not possibly do, it is more vast and disturbing, darker. It touches on elements of science fiction in the poetic sense, like that of Chris Marker, closer to metafiction, which is a better description of what we want to achieve." The theme of an automaton is embedded in the story of an *amour fou* set in an indeterminate period of the first quarter of the 20th century. The location is a secluded property flanked by the ocean and a forest, in a world where time is stretched. The juxtaposition of imperious logic and alchemy suggested by the project's synopsis is fertile terrain for the Quay Brothers' visual and lyrical imaginations.

Seen as a whole, the Quay Brothers' works are independent of any definable genre; indeed, the imitation of their style which can be observed in films of other animators is a complimentary gesture to the auteur style they have developed. Throughout their opus, a continuity can be observed: the Quays' artistic devotion to the marginal, to the nobody, and the unnoticed, quietly elevated into the sublime. Their films are unbound by time, preferring to investigate what they call "a poetry of shadowy encounters and almost conspiratorial secretness." Whether commissioned or independently produced, the films retain the unique signature which informs their work. "We like going for long walks, metaphorically, into whatever country we go to—we could disappear in any country." On all their wanderings, the Quays continue to pursue their own particular commitment to the Walserian "Beatification of Zero."

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Some of the Quay Brothers' short films, and *Institute Benjamenta*, are available from Zeitgeist Films, in New York City.

J. Ronald Green

Oscar Micheaux's Interrogation of Caricature as Entertainment

Along with the serious problems of virtual absence from the public eye and blocked access to the paid jobs that would place black performers before the public, there were in Oscar Micheaux's time few problems for African Americans more important in the realm of entertainment than those of stereotype and caricature. Any autonomous effort by African Americans to engage in serious performance, to work out their own identity as American citizens and thereby to provide a realistic and autonomous model

of African-American citizenship through public spectatorship, was constantly blocked by the pervasiveness of ethnic, rube-like images. Nothing could be accomplished until that problem was dealt with. Oscar Micheaux made it a top priority.

As many film scholars and buffs now know, Micheaux is the most prolific African- American filmmaker ever. Between 1913 and 1948 he produced seven novels and about forty African-American films, all for black audiences. Fifteen films have survived, most of them available on film or video, and all of them available among the major American film archives.[1] Micheaux, born in 1884 to a farming family near the Ohio River in Illinois, was disparaged by the local clergy as a bad influence, a boy who thought too much and asked impertinent questions. He had no formal education beyond high school, worked briefly as a teenager in stockyards, steel yards, and barber shops before landing a job as a Pullman porter. His job on the railroad took him through the Rosebud Indian reservation in South Dakota, which was just being opened for homesteading. Micheaux bought a relinquished homestead there in 1906 and farmed until about 1912, when drought and family problems ruined him.[2] His neighbors, almost all white, impressed with his effort and accomplishment, urged him to write a book about his experiences. He did so, self-published and self-distributed it, and went on to write and produce others. When he was approached in 1918 by an African-American film company that wanted to film *The Homesteader*, Micheaux decided he would film it himself, which he did within a few months. He went on from there to be an independent producer and distributor for the race-movie circuit for thirty years.

Until recently, Micheaux has been celebrated by critics mostly for his entrepreneurial rather than his artistic contribution. One of the most serious objections to his work relates to his use of negative racial caricatures. That objection, however, has seldom been thoroughly examined in the light of Micheaux's historical situation.

That historical situation might be perceived as progressive. The Fisk Jubilee Singers—a well-known choral group organized to make fund-raising tours for the recently founded black Fisk University, in Nashville—had already lived an exhilarating moment when the potential for their full citizenship was being demonstrated publicly in a new way. When the Jubilee Singers set out in 1871 to tour the eastern part of the country, the ground was prepared for them by white civic and religious leaders in the major northern cities. The hesitant white audiences who attended their concerts, drawn only by the entreaties of their trusted ministers, did not know what to expect from black performers except minstrelsy. The Fisk Singers astonished them with their sophisticated middle-class musicality and social demeanor, and the tour netted a huge $20,000 in revenue for the university.[3] The leaders at Fisk were carving a niche for their ethnic group that would be a reference point of progress both culturally and financially.

A mere five years later, however, all progressive momentum was reversed. Rutherford Hayes was in the White House, Reconstruction was in retreat, and lynchings and Ku Klux Klan activities were on the rise. With the great northern migrations of African Americans a few years later came race riots in the northern cities as white competitors at the lower end of the meritocracy reacted to the influx of low-cost African-American labor.

Micheaux was developing his early work through some of the worst of these setbacks. The great migration of blacks from the South occurred during the First World War, at the time Micheaux was writing his second novel. The most famous of the postwar riots occurred in East St. Louis in 1917 and in Chicago in 1919, just as Micheaux's film career was getting under way in Chicago. The earliest of his films that has survived, *Within Our Gates* (1919), deals directly with the subject of lynching and was consequently subjected to censorship in Chicago and elsewhere; it was banned or rejected for screening in many venues.

Onto this historical scene stepped D. W. Griffith. Soon after Micheaux had published his angry and ironic books about the failure of his homesteading enterprise (*The Conquest*, 1913) and of black enterprise in general (*The Forged Note*, 1915), Griffith scored an epic conquest over any progress in the African-American condition that might have been made since the time of the Fisk Jubilee campaign. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a sophisticated film production, convincing enough in its techniques of realism to inspire the president of the United States, the former president of Princeton University, and a respected historian (all in the person of Woodrow Wilson) to call it "history written in lighting." Wilson's judgment notwithstanding, Griffith's cinematic sophistication contained not a grain of social, political, or economic illumination. The idealism that defines the white protagonists—produced with Billy Bitzer's famous soft-focus, backlighted portrait technique in the case of the Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh characters,

and by the editing strategies for which Griffith is celebrated—is illusionistic.

Any realism of *The Birth of a Nation* breaks down completely around its portraits of blacks, played by white men and women in blackface, whom Harvard University historian Nathan Huggins has characterized as "merely playing minstrel types." Griffith's minstrelized "realism" arose in Micheaux's adulthood. That in itself would justify the continuing need for promotional and critical strategies such as those pioneered by the Fisk Singers forty-five years earlier. But the situation is even worse than that, since Griffith's legacy of black minstrel characters in realistic settings has continued into our own time with a rather shocking literalness. That the genre that combines animated cartoons with live-action cinematography is a small one makes it the more surprising that a high percentage of the best known of such films deal with African-American material, e.g., *Song of the South* (1946), *Coonskin* (1975), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988; "[t/c]oontown"), and *Space Jam* (1996).

In spite of the emergence of the New Negro, any change in the historical situation in Micheaux's time seemed to be change for the worse. The film industry had absorbed the success of *The Birth of a Nation* into its genetic materials. Black independent filmmakers fought back with "positive image" films, such as *The Birth of a Race* (1919), which emerged stillborn from the Booker T. Washington staff's efforts, and *The Trooper of Troop K* (1916), from the Lincoln Company. All such films failed rhetorically or financially. The NAACP fought Griffith and Hollywood through various means, including an unsuccessful attempt at a coproduction with Carl Laemmle. The NAACP made no headway until the 1942 agreement between them and a group of Hollywood studio heads; that agreement, which was considered a breakthrough, was so small a concession as to be hardly an occasion for celebration.[4] Micheaux, in fact, was faced with a more violent racial climate than the one faced by the Fisk Singers in 1871.

The presence of violent intimidation in the daily lives of black Americans, and of deadly violence reported regularly "in the grapevine" and in the public media, was a hindrance to black autonomy against which any strategy for advancement would have to struggle. Merely doing a good job and adopting the dominant American values was not an adequate strategy, especially in the South. Nathan Huggins has explained the role of violence in the evolution of the ethnic caricatures of the second age of minstrelsy and the age of ragtime:

> The black mask of the minstrel—its most figurative representation of the ethnic stereotype—was a substantive shield protecting more than self-esteem. The mask was a means of survival—only by wearing it in some form could black entertainers find work—and, even more, it was a defense against violence. . . . [M]instrel groups reported that "as soon as all the members of the company were on the ground we would start playing 'Dixie.' No matter how many different tunes we had in our band books, we could play that song in any key." It was as if the modus vivendi depended on the Negroes continuing to play their parts, off stage as well as on. And these black performers knew that their very existence depended on their never pretending to be other than their stage characters.[5]

The trick that black performers played was to inhabit these stereotypes as a survival niche and to develop and sometimes revise the stereotypes while under their protection. Among the more daunting questions Micheaux took upon himself to address in his career was the one Huggins later posed: "Who were these black men *really*?" There is little question that one of Micheaux's principal missions was to show "that a colored man can be anything."[6]

Caricature was perceived by Micheaux as a prime obstacle for black advancement and its removal was an early rhetorical objective necessary to his goal. Blacks in the performing arts desperately needed to shed the caricature being used as a shelter. Micheaux's engagement with his objective took the form of presenting caricature for the purpose of criticising it. There are more or less pure examples of his use of this form. At the pure end of the spectrum are explicit caricatures, minstrel figures directly from the world of performance and entertainment. Such caricatures occur in Micheaux's films that include music and performance as subjects, such as *The Darktown Revue* (1931), *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), *Swing!* (1938), *Lying Lips* (1939), and *Birthright* (1939). At the less pure end of the spectrum are characters who are fully embedded in the plot—not in production numbers or skits—who nevertheless have characteristics comparable to minstrel caricatures. Such characters occur in *Within Our Gates* (the snitch who spies incompetently on the murder of the white aristocrat), in *Body and Soul* (1924; the church congregation at the preacher's shouting sermon), in *Birthright* (the character called the Persimmon, who is another snitch) and in most of the other extant films.

By far the purest example of Micheaux's use of minstrel caricature is *The Darktown Revue*, since it is in fact a staged bit of black musical theater. The minstrel caricatures provided by three vaudeville veterans—the team of Tim Moore (who later became Kingfish on the television series "Amos and Andy") and Andrew Trible, and the solo act of Amon Davis —are very broad "coon" caricatures. It is not evident that either act had the kind of redeeming self-referentiality or pathos that must have been perceived in the work of, for example, Bert Williams and George Walker, the great vaudeville team of the previous generation, and of Williams after Walker's death in 1911. The acts in *The Darktown Revue* are old-fashioned antebellum and post-Reconstruction caricatures. Though they are in themselves unregenerate, they are nevertheless meant to entertain and to impress an audience, probably primarily black. The two acts in Micheaux's film are not untypical of race movies in that respect, and both acts are very good. The second, Amon Davis's rendering of a shouting preacher, is a brilliant ironic transformation of the letters of the alphabet into a seemingly passionate spiritual jeremiad. Davis's act would stand up well today if it were not so painfully redolent of "ethnic notions."

The audience for *The Darktown Revue* was invited to stand above these caricatures in spite of their enjoyment of them. The chorus in *The Darktown Revue* serves as a surrogate audience; they stand behind and above the preacher so that their pseudo-serious and mildly amused and bemused expressions can be read as a commentary. Lest the facial expressions seem too subtle a commentary, the music sung by the chorus is more explicit—after the Moore and Trible skit, the chorus sings "Ain't It a Shame," and the framing song that the chorus sings before and after the sermon skit is the rhetorically titled "Is That Religion?" The implied answers to both those songs' questions are that Moore and Trible's skit *is* a shame and that Davis's hard-shell preaching is *not* religion. Also, when the preacher leaves, there is sexual innuendo in his parting word to the "sisters" and he does not bother to address the men in the "choir." The lyrics of the chorus's song then explicitly critique this sort of religion and these sorts of deacons and preachers.

In the $ABAB^1AB^2AB^n$-structure of this revue, the recurring A (the chorus) represents black middle-class legitimacy, the series of B, B^1, B^n (the vaudeville skits) represents various illegitimate ethnic caricatures, such as "coons" and (for Micheaux) hard-shell preachers. The $ABAB^n$ structure is *paradigmatic* and is used repeatedly by Micheaux as a narrative form for his cinematic, class-based critique. As a paradigm of Micheaux's critique, the A represents (consciously or not) middle-classness and is the term upon which the positive values for critique are founded; it is the normative reference by which the qualities of the caricature series $B\text{-}B^n$ are found wanting.

In the light of this paradigm, it is easy to see why Micheaux has been accused of racial self-hatred and white racism. Ethnic criticism, however, for the purpose of ethnic development is not necessarily racist. The A figure in the paradigm can be understood complexly and dialectically and cannot automatically be equated with whiteness, the pseudo-white, or any unproblematized notion of middle-classness or bourgeois values.

The Cutting Gaze

The paradigmatic schema of the ABAB represents the basic elements of Micheaux's dialectics of high and low, of spirituals and jazz, of swing and blues, and of white and black, including the condition of "twoness" (having to negotiate both poles of the dialectic) introduced by DuBois. Those same dialectics provide the framework for Micheaux's ideas of moderation, the middle path, and the middle class. At the same time, however, those dialectics also provide the framework for a cinematic "surgical" procedure in relation to the gaze. Micheaux presented a simple configuration of shot and edit that implies the "cutting" of the B figure by the A figure. When the minstrel and vaudeville performers, or B figures, are introduced in the same shot with the chorus members, or A figures, the B figures are gazed upon by the A figures in a way that implies reprobation. When the film cuts analytically from

The paradigm shot: upper-class chorus as surrogate audience for lower-class caricature in *The Darktown Review*

such establishing shots of A and B figures to separate, detail shots of the B figures, or to and from detail shots of the A figures and the B figures, the "cutting gaze" of the A figures becomes the surrounding context for the film's suggested critical reception of the B figures' show. The A figures continue to hold the stage and the screen, while the B figures pass in "revue" and are, in effect, assessed, found wanting, and then excised.

The last B figure in *The Darktown Revue*, the hard-shell preacher, is a particularly direct manifestation of this search-and-destroy operation. Micheaux particularly despised black preachers, especially "jackleg" charismatics such as the one Paul Robeson plays in *Body and Soul.* The vaudeville skit of the hard-shell sermon is appropriate as a final target for Micheaux's exorcistic revue.

Micheaux's cutting gaze is one analytic description of what has been criticized in his work as a focus on negative images. The cutting gaze is, however, a formal foundation for an intensely critical cinema, and as such, it contributes to uplift by criticizing the obstacles of uplift and figuratively suggesting their removal. The figure of the cutting gaze represents a step beyond the related uplift strategy of the Fisk Singers, since the great focus at Fisk was on the A figure itself, the positive image of African Americans, which at that time was surprise enough for the white world. Micheaux's vision of the cutting gaze goes beyond positive images, functioning within "the race" as an exorcism, a sort of cinematic staring cure.

Micheaux's concentration on certain negative qualities that he found identifiable as African-American is common to ethnic groups in the American melting pot. It is related to the rube joke and rube movie, though the versions of the rube associated with racism were especially virulent. The fact that such negative images would be nurtured *within* the stereotyped group is not surprising, given the pressures to assimilate in the new mass society. A passion of certain Jews to assimilate helped to form the valuative paradigms of Hollywood, with all its rube figures and stereotypes.[7]

Negative images that developed within the African-American community need not be read as evidence of self-hatred, however, as social critic Shelby Steele has shown:

> No one in my family remembers how it happened, but as time went on, the negative images congealed into an imaginary character named Sam who, from the extensive service we put him to, quickly grew to mythic proportions. In our family lore he was sometimes a trickster, sometimes a boob, but always possessed of a catalogue of sly faults that gave us graphic images of everything we should not be. On sacrifice: "Sam never thinks about tomorrow. He wants it now or he doesn't care about it." On work: "Sam doesn't favor it too much." On children: "Sam likes to have them but not to raise them." On money: "Sam drinks it up and pisses it out." On fidelity: "Sam has to have two or three women." On clothes: "Sam features loud clothes. He likes to see and be seen." And so on. Sam's persona amounted to a negative instruction manual in class identity.
>
> I don't think that any of us believed Sam's faults were accurate representations of lower-class black life. He was an instrument of self-definition, not of sociological accuracy. It never occurred to us that he looked very much like the white racist stereotype of blacks, or that he might have been a manifestation of our own racial self-hatred. He simply gave us a counterpoint against which to express our aspirations. If self-hatred was a factor, it was not, for us, a matter of hating lower-class blacks but of hating what we did not want to be.
>
> Still, hate or love aside, it is fundamentally true that my middle-class identity involved a dissociation from images of lower-class black life and a corresponding identification with values and patterns of responsibility that are common to the middle class everywhere.[8]

For better or worse, Micheaux's abuse of characters such as Steele's Sam, and his surgical use of shooting and editing on such characters, recurs throughout his work. *The Darktown Revue*, because it is short and mostly uncluttered with competing narrative incident, is a relatively pure example. In other Micheaux films, the cutting gaze is deployed in more complex narrative and rhetorical contexts that expand its usefulness and transform its simplicity into elegance.

Murder in Harlem

The cutting gaze—the ABAB paradigm of middle-class observation of lower-class behavior—operates throughout *Murder in Harlem* (a.k.a. *Lem Hawkins' Confession*; 1935). The scene in which the female

lead, Claudia Vance (Dorothy Van Engle), vamps Lem Hawkins (Alec Lovejoy)—one of the less-than-admirable black characters who is caught in the machinations of white intrigue—contains a set of variations on the paradigm. The setting is a large apartment living room that is used as a "buffet flat," an informal nightclub where one could dance, buy illegal drinks, listen to live jazz, and watch floor shows. According to Bessie Smith's biographer, Chris Albertson,

> Buffet flats—sometimes referred to as good-time flats—were small, privately owned establishments featuring all sorts of illegal activities: gambling and erotic shows, as well as sex acts of every conceivable kind. These buffet flats were usually owned by women, who ran them with admirable efficiency, catering to the occasional thrill-seeker as well as to regular clients whose personal tastes they knew intimately.
>
> . . . Buffet flats were always located in private homes or apartments. Bootleg liquor was plentiful, and a different "show" was usually presented in each room.[9]

The clientele at the buffet flat in Micheaux's film are portrayed as respectable and middle class. They are dressed in impeccable evening clothes and their manners are polite and reserved in spite of their obvious enjoyment of the evening and in spite of their drinking and some frivolous party hats. Albertson has emphasized the class-based legitimacy of the daring entertainment at buffet flats:

> Buffet flats had a reputation for being safe, and reports of violent incidents and thefts were rare. Originally set up for the benefit of Pullman porters . . . whose travels, contacts with the white world, gentlemanly manners, and good income gained them much respect in the black communities—these establishments served as models for the outwardly legitimate "high-class" night clubs where tuxedoed maître d's discreetly provided "important persons" with sexual liaisons that suited their tastes.[10]

When Lem Hawkins shows up at the door of this high-class establishment, he is greeted by the owner of the flat, "The Catbird" (Bee Freeman), who compliments his attire and offers to take his hat and cane; she tells him that he looks "hot" tonight and that she would not mind making a play for him herself. The audience might be inclined to take these compliments at face value if this sequence had not been introduced by a scene in which The Catbird and her male partner discuss what a fool Hawkins is and how they are going to trick him out of his newfound wealth at the buffet-flat party that night. Also, Hawkins looks out of place even though he is dressed up. He is wearing a brown, ill-fitting suit with a lighter-colored vest; he is unfashionably overweight, and, though he is smoking with a fancy cigarette holder, he handles it as if it were a cheap cigar. The other clientele are dressed in perfectly fitting evening clothes, many in black tie or evening gowns; they are fashionably trim, and they urbanely smoke cigarettes. Micheaux's insertion of the explicitly lower-class Hawkins into this upper-class environment is an extension of the A/upper-class, B/lower-class structure of the cutting gaze manifested in its purist form in *The Darktown Revue*. In *Murder in Harlem*, the ABAB paradigm is integrated into a more complex narrative, and the idea of the entertainment stereotype as inhabiting the class relations of daily life is elaborated.

When Hawkins calls the waiter to bring a drink, he uses the exceedingly impolite phrase, "Say, dark man," as if he were drinking with other commoners in a bar. There is no interpreting this remark as a color prejudice on the part of the filmmaker, since there is no indication that Micheaux identified himself with Lem Hawkins nor that he wished the film viewer to do so. In fact, the waiter is dark, but so is the would-be slanderer, Lem Hawkins, and so are some of the higher-class clientele with whom the audience is indeed meant to identify. The dark-skinned waiter is seen in the background of most of the shots of Hawkins and Claudia, talking to the bartender, who himself is not only noticeably lighter-skinned but also a friendly companion to the "dark man." There is apparently no invidious distinction between those two based on their skin color.

The skin-color scheme in this scene is consistent with Micheaux's other films and can be summarized as follows: darkness and lightness of skin sometimes affect perceptions of beauty in Micheaux's work in the sense that lighter skin is often preferred for characters representing the "beautiful people"; Micheaux's beautiful people, however, are not always his "good" people. In addition, the equation of lighter skin with beauty is associated with a widely shared convention that many prominent race leaders felt was, while unfortunate, temporarily unavoidable owing to the cultural hegemony of the white majority.[11]

In Micheaux's work, both beauty and goodness of character are to be found in very dark people as well as

in light-skinned people. The issue of Micheaux's deployment of skin tone is debated in the literature; suffice it to say here that Micheaux himself was relatively dark and that several of his heroes are dark and several of his villains very light.[12] As Pearl Bowser has pointed out, Micheaux had to work within the conventions of skin tone in race-entertainment circles, conventions that explicitly favored light skin; consequently it is difficult to generalize today about the ultimate meaning of Micheaux's choices of skin tone.[13]

The issue of skin tone aside, the "dandy," Hawkins, has made a triple error in the context of the refined, middle-class African-American entertainment venue of the buffet flat—he has invoked an invidious (and, in this scene, clearly false) class distinction based on skin tone; he has expressed it rudely; and he has invoked it unknowingly against himself. These mistakes are themselves evidences of lower class. The waiter, after being called so rudely, approaches Hawkins and Claudia very slowly, having exchanged concerned and disgusted glances with both the bartender and with his boss, The Catbird. On approaching the table, the waiter gives Hawkins the evil eye—a cutting gaze—then turns slowly and gives Claudia a big smile, thus making a clear distinction between Hawkins and Claudia regarding their worthiness of his regard.

The fact that Hawkins has made an earlier distinction between himself and the waiter based on skin tones; the fact that Hawkins has not considered the implication of that distinction for himself, since Hawkins is darker than most of the clientele in the room; the fact that Hawkins does not realize he is insulting all dark people within range of his voice; and the fact that Hawkins has spoken in a loud and public manner, places him in a certain class not only below that of the clientele, but below even the entertainers and servants whom Micheaux portrays as respectable, accomplished and attractive in their own right. It is no accident that the waiter adopts a slow-moving caricature routine that is, in fact, very much like that of a black-face entertainer. He is signifying an appropriate response to Hawkins' behavior by alluding to an entertainment stereotype of black ostentation that Hawkins appears to have invited and inhabited.

The waiter and Hawkins become part of a cinematic demonstration of the close connection between embarrassing public behavior and the persistence of harmful caricatures in white entertainment. Such entertainment figures were hurting the African-American citizenry, and hurting in a special way precisely those people, entertainers or not, who practiced the vestiges of minstrel caricature.

In the the world of the story, Lem Hawkins is not actually an entertainer; however, small connections throughout the scene in the buffet flat tend to weave him into the fabric of the buffet flat's featured entertainment. The spectator of the film is invited to interpret Hawkins' behavior as a performance, and to distinguish him from the other clients at the buffet flat who comprise an audience for performance. Hawkins is dressed more like the entertainers and the servants at the party than like the clients, and he is recognized by the entertainers and servants as a member of their class.

A scene that almost immediately follows corroborates Micheaux's probable intention to invest Hawkins with the worst characteristics of the world of race entertainment. A man dressed in dark pants and dark pullover and wearing a light pork-pie hat appears at the door of the buffet flat. The maître d' tries to explain to the man that he is not welcome, which generates an exaggerated exchange that resembles the vaudeville routines of, for example, Williams and Walker. In fact, the interloper looks enough like Bert Williams, and the maître d' like George Walker, that black audiences, who venerated the Williams and Walker team, might have made that connection. The interloper (the Williams figure) has been gotten up, like Williams, in something approximating blackface tradition. In that sense, he signifies the appearance of minstrel caricatures that masquerade as realistic characters in such rube movies as *The Birth of a Nation.* Micheaux makes the absurdity of white-audience minstrel entertainment itself—and its legacy in such figures as the northern valet in *The Birth*— the butt of the joke instead of the caricatured African Americans themselves. He reverses the rube joke and turns the rube movie inside out.

The Bert Williams-like interloper enters the buffet flat in spite of the maître d's efforts to eject him. Since he is a lower-class caricature of a fool from the entertainment world, one expects him to go looking for his friend among the entertainers or servants, but instead he pays special attention to Hawkins, who is technically a client of the social club. The interloper moves very slowly toward and around Hawkins' table, giving Hawkins a long stare, much like that of the "Hey, dark man" incident. The interloper then asks if Hawkins has seen a very black man with one eye and a crooked nose called "Bogeyman." Hawkins and Claudia laugh at him, and slowly he leaves, still staring at Hawkins. Hawkins has again been fixed with an emphatic, vaudeville-derived gaze, and thus singled out for inclusion in a discourse of fools and caricatures drawn explicitly from entertainment routines, but presented as part of the off-stage story.

Here, Micheaux was not denigrating entertainers or entertainment, which was after all, his own profession. He was interrogating non-entertainers who inhabited the caricatures of a specific form of "racial" entertainment; and intrinsically he was interrogating the entertainment that produced those caricatures.

Identifying with Entertainers

Standard format for Hollywood musicals calls for: (1) diegetic non-entertainers *to behave as if* they were entertainers (to break into song without seeming to interrupt the diegesis, as Fred Astaire might do in the middle of a love scene and as Ann Miller does in the Museum of Natural Science in *On the Town* [1949]); (2) diegetic non-entertainers *to become* diegetic entertainers, as Al Jolson does in *The Jazz Singer* [1927]); or (3) for diegetic entertainers themselves *to be the main characters* of the diegesis as entertainers whose lives are followed by the narrative both on stage and off, as in the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Whereas all of these Hollywood combinations typically produce positive images by associating diegetic amateurs with diegetic professional entertainers, Micheaux's combination of the same elements produces a negative image. The diegetic amateur (non-entertainer) such as the dandy Lem Hawkins, is *degraded* rather than elevated by his association with professional entertainers, and entertainers themselves are loosely placed in a class with or below servants. For example, in Micheaux's *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), it is the servants who always provide the song and dance numbers.

As film and television scholar Jane Feuer has pointed out, professional singers are often used by Hollywood to portray amateurs:

> For a movie genre which itself represents professional entertainment and which is also frequently about professional entertainers, there seems to be a remarkable emphasis on the joys of being an amateur. . . .
>
> No performer in the Hollywood musical had more talent than Judy Garland, and no performer more frequently portrayed the amateur, a girl who sings for love instead of money. Judy Garland's child-like qualities were exploited in her films in order to lend an amateur feeling to all her performances. Eve[n] her vocal quality is kept within an

amateur range; music critic Henry Pleasants has observed that Garland's singing voice had "a sound innocent of anything that smacked of artful management."[14]

Feuer's insight concerning the contradictory use of professional entertainers to celebrate amateurism is an important contribution to the workings of Hollywood illusionism, showing how the commercial traffic in joy and talent constructs an idea of itself as explicitly *non*commercial. A certain diluted Brechtian strain within the professional world of Hollywood has played with anti-illusionistic ideas such as Feuer's. When Joshua Logan, for example, selected nonsinging actors Jean Seberg and Clint Eastwood to play singing parts in *Paint Your Wagon* (1969), he reversed the Hollywood convention of selecting professional singers to portray amateurs. Since the audience could have been expected to know that neither Seberg nor Eastwood was a professional singer, it would understand the actors' bursting into song to be a parody and a reversal of the standard conventions of the musical genre. Since the singing is patently awful (though charming), the audience can discern the reversal even without any knowledge of Seberg and Eastwood's professional resumes.

The effect of distanciation from the standard conventions of Hollywood illusionism—the replacement of the professional amateur by the amateur professional—fits well into Logan's extended comparison of *Paint Your Wagon* with Brecht's own anti-illusionistic, wild-West musical, *Mahagonny.* The anti-illusionism in the professional-amateur reversal was further extended by the nondiegetic knowledge that many viewers would have had, in the case of Jean Seberg, that the star was not even a professional actress in the usual sense, since she had been created twelve years earlier by Otto Preminger in a talent search conceived to promote his production of *Saint Joan* (1957). Logan thus was able to produce anti-illusionistic statements about both the Hollywood musical genre and Hollywood cinema in general.

Such anti-illusionism is not so unusual in the Hollywood cinema. Fun is had with the nondiegetic knowledge that Irene Dunne is treated by one of the characters as an incompetent amateur singer in *The Awful Truth* (1937) when fans in the audience were perfectly aware that the nondiegetic (and diegetic character, for that matter, as the evidence of her singing demonstrates) Irene Dunne has a trained operatic voice. Similar fun can be derived from Elvis Presley's movies and other vehicle genres.

All these examples come from white cinema and are perhaps largely limited to white entertainers. The formula may not easily extend to African-American cinema or to black entertainers meant for black audiences. For example, Micheaux's association of amateurs with the realm of entertainers is not meant to emphasize joy and talent, but foolishness and low class. The strategies of mainstream musicals that Feuer has described and the strategy of Micheaux in this case are based on opposing values: white mainstream-movie viewers are expected to identify with entertainers; black race movie viewers are asked by Micheaux's film to identify with non-entertainers who wanted to be *consumers* or even *producers* of entertainment.

This set of identifications has implications for class position. White viewers may envy the performance talent and expressive capacities of the lower-class performers in mainstream movies; Micheaux was encouraging black viewers to envy the material power and social esteem of the higher-class consumers of entertainment in his movies. This can be seen explicitly in the scenes described above, in which Micheaux invites the black film audience to identify with the elevated and cool cutting gaze of diegetic audiences rather than with the disdained foolishness of those characters whose actions are being laughed at as if they were the entertainment.

Identifying with Producers

Micheaux's black viewers may have identified with performers at times, but primarily (according to Micheaux's paradigm) as a means to class mobility. There is little evidence in the films of envy of talent per se. Micheaux apparently did not expect the black audience to wish that they could just burst into professional song like Judy Garland or Ethel Waters. He seems to have expected them to wish they could produce and own the show that presented Judy Garland or Ethel Waters, or to wish they were among the "swells" in the audience on the night a Garland or a Waters was introduced to the public. Of the several films in which Micheaux presented a diegetic producer with whom the audience was expected to identify, the most obvious is *Swing!* The main character is the producer of a show that eventually makes it to Broadway. As in all analogous characters in Micheaux's films, he is a surrogate for the filmmaker

himself, and he is supposed to represent an appropriate figure of uplift and to be above reproach. While entertainers were to be enjoyed in a critical way, not often as objects of identification, producers of entertainment (as well as business men, professionals, independent farmers, and property owners) were to be identified with wholeheartedly.

Whether Micheaux was right about who his audience would identify with is a question that cannot be answered without (badly needed) studies of the reception of Micheaux's films. The fact that Micheaux encouraged such identification is beyond doubt and it is an important point, since it interrogates a common perception that African Americans have until recently seen the field of entertainment—whether in performing arts or athletics—primarily as an opportunity for stardom. Micheaux saw it, and created visions of it, as an opportunity for class advancement and increased control of the entertainment image and thus defeat of ethnic caricature.

Identifying with Critical Spectatorship

Returning to the scene from *Murder in Harlem*, we see Claudia Vance suggesting that she and Lem Hawkins dance. She compliments Hawkins' dancing, but it is clear to the film viewer that Hawkins is a juke-joint dancer rather than a nightclub or ballroom dancer like the patrons who surround them. This shot is composed so that such a comparison is unavoidable, since Claudia and Hawkins, alone in the extreme foreground, are surrounded by elegant dancers in the background. The elegant dancers not only form a virtual audience for the performance in the foreground, *but they behave explicitly like an audience* watching the show in front of them. These sophisticated dancers watch Hawkins just as the sophisticated chorus in *The Darktown Revue* watched the vaudeville skit of the hard-shell preacher—and with the same disdain. One of Hawkins' observers runs his eyes up and down Hawkins in casual disbelief at the foolish spectacle, replicating precisely the actions of chorus members in *Darktown.* The dancers in *Murder in Harlem* and the chorus in *The Darktown Revue* are functioning as commentators on the action, as did the chorus in classical Greek drama.

The similarity of composition and meaning of the shot in *Murder in Harlem* with those of the shot in *The Darktown Revue*, and with scenes such as Jean Baptiste's spectatorlike relationship with the combination of domestic violence and a floor show in *The Exile* (1931), suggests the reprise of the paradigm shot of the cutting gaze—the middle-class look of disdain upon lower-class behavior. It also suggests a nonincidental relation of the diegetic cutting gaze to critical spectatorship in entertainment. The application of the *Darktown* shot as a paradigm in the scene in *Murder in Harlem* reaffirms not only Micheaux's critique of minstrel caricature, but also his intention to make an *explicit connection between the caricatures of African Americans prevalent in entertainment and lower-class black behavior in everyday life.*

The idea that blacks in everyday life might be considered by whites as minstrel entertainment is not farfetched. G. D. Pike, the organizer and first director

The paradigm shot of upper-class observation of lower-class behavior as it occurs in *Murder in Harlem.* The dancers behind are, like the chorus in *Darktown Review*, an audience enjoying an entertainment.

of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, noted in 1873 the surprise of white audiences in their reception of the Fisk Singers' sophisticated, non-minstrel entertainment. Even in Micheaux's time, a distinguished black novelist and editor, Jessie Fauset, reported the following sentiment of a friendly white journalist:

> . . . the sort of attitude instanced by a journalist the other day who thought colored people ought to be willing to permit the term "nigger" because it carries with it so much picturesqueness defines pretty well, I think, our position in the eyes of the white world. Either we are inartistic or we are picturesque and always the inference is implied that we live objectively with one eye on the attitude of the white world *as though it were the audience and we the players* whose hope and design is to please [emphasis added].[15]

Fauset's observation, made in 1922, describes the audience-vs.-entertainer structure inherent in caricature and relates that structure to daily life; the term "nigger" seemed to the white journalist unobjectionably to imply "entertainment." In 1935, Micheaux described just such an audience-vs.-entertainment structure in his paradigmatic shot composition, with the "entertainment," Lem Hawkins, dancing in the foreground and the "audience" dancing in the background and explicitly registering its amusement. Micheaux left little doubt about which group, the audience or the entertainers, he favored—the audience was cool, and Hawkins was a fool.

Thus Micheaux placed not just entertainers but also middle-class spectators within the film like a Greek chorus for his black audience to identify with and be guided by. In that sense, he suggested an African-American context for the uplift policies developed by the Eden Musée, the Motion Picture Patent Company, and D. W. Griffith. Micheaux had a different goal, however. It might seem cruel of Micheaux to have emphasized class difference in a way that invites comparison with D.W. Griffith's racist derogations and that recalls rube movies and invites laughter and disdain toward a class-bound "brother" by treating Lem Hawkins as caricatured entertainment.

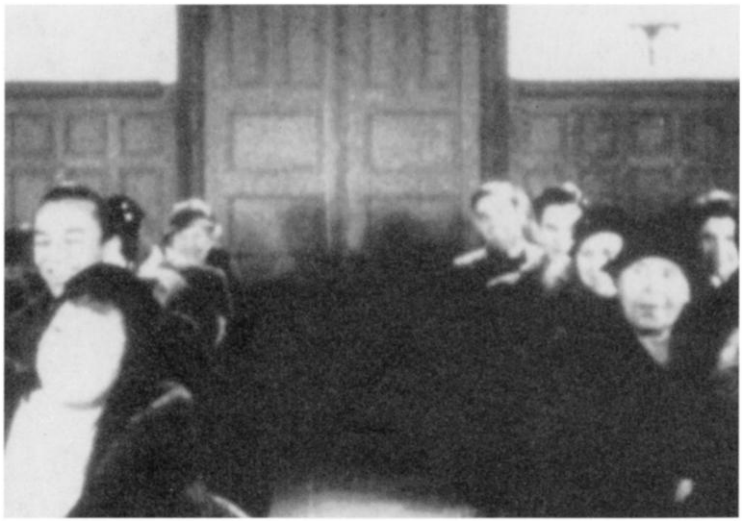
The point, however, for Micheaux was not cruelty. The point was to defeat the behavioral habits of caricature through critical spectatorship. *Murder in Harlem* is not a rube movie. Micheaux was not using caricature as a platform for elevating himself at the expense of another through a strategy of class distinction. Micheaux's strategy of uplift was directed not primarily at an existing African-American middle class, since that class was too small to support a cinema of its own. Micheaux also had some disdain for the contemporary manifestations of members of the black middle class, who, he said, were too concerned with status and seldom read books. Micheaux was, in fact, primarily addressing the class below, with the intention of goading them out of their lower-class condition, as expressed in the often-quoted remark from his first novel: "One of the greatest tasks of my life has been to convince a certain class of my racial acquaintances that a colored man can be anything [emphasis added]."[16]

That statement is representative of Micheaux's purpose and fundamental to his integrity. The common observations by critics and scholars that denigrate Micheaux's career as defined by confidence games, manipulation, showmanship, a genius for self-promotion, and an assimilationist imitation of white culture are not convincing. It is true, however, that some of Micheaux's caricatures are perhaps too pleasurably painful, which might indicate some meanness, or at least thoughtlessness, in them (sadism or cruelty would be too strong a characterization). Micheaux, however, felt that the difficulty of his mission required tough, unrelenting criticism of his own group, as he stated in an open letter that appeared in several African-American newspapers:

> I have always tried to make my photoplays present the truth, to lay before the race a cross-section of its own life, to view the colored heart from close range. . . . It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights. I am too much imbued with the spirit of Booker T. Washington to engraft false virtues upon ourselves, to make ourselves that which we are not. Nothing could be a greater blow to our own progress.[17]

Tough Interrogation Pays Off

It is true that Lem Hawkins, in the scene analyzed above, is portrayed by Micheaux explicitly according to white racist stereotype as a kind of caricature from the world of entertainment, though Hawkins has no such *literal* role in the world of the story. However, a



The courtroom audience enjoying the interrogation of caricature as entertainment in *Murder in Harlem*

The literal interrogation in *Murder in Harlem*

major narrative and rhetorical reversal occurs later in the film when the leading man, Henry Glory, a striving middle-class black attorney (and an explicit surrogate for Micheaux himself), subjects Hawkins to a tough interrogation on the witness stand. Micheaux places him on the stand to interrogate him as caricature and as entertainment. Just before that scene, Glory tells his client (the framed nightwatchman's sister, Claudia, who has retained Glory to handle her brother's defense) that he knows how to make Hawkins talk. The way Glory makes Hawkins talk is by badgering and ridiculing him on the witness stand, which causes the (mostly black) courtroom audience to laugh. Glory turns the poor Hawkins into a caricature in front of an audience; Micheaux was thus emphasizing the paradigm from *The Darktown Revue*: the literal, material connection between the African-American class predicament and black entertainment.

Glory's diegetic interrogation of Hawkins is a key to Micheaux's class position and his relationship with his audience. Glory loosely represents Micheaux himself, since Glory is first introduced in the film selling his own self-published novel door-to-door in the black community, which is precisely how Micheaux had made a living before and even during his film career and is also closely analogous to the way Micheaux distributed his films. Glory's tough attitude toward Hawkins' buffoonery thus replicates Shelby Steele's Sam and Micheaux's own vision of the behavior of African Americans "of a certain class." The key, however, to understanding and appreciating Micheaux's position is in the *results* of the courtroom interrogation.

The first few sequences representing Hawkins' testimony under interrogation reaffirm Micheaux's intention to connect Hawkins to entertainment caricature. In

Micheaux Film Festival

In 1997 I was an invited scholar at the second annual Oscar Micheaux Film Festival in Gregory, South Dakota. Though it is very small, is not run by film professionals, and is in a remote location, it is one of the best festivals I have ever attended. Space does not allow the sharing of the experience, but I do want to get the word out.

The festival organizers are Richard Papousek and Francie Johnson, citizens of Gregory who are exploring the history of their region using the inherent interest of a famous citizen as a catalyst. They have located most of the sites mentioned in Micheaux's books and films, and have reconstruct his 1907 homestead, an inspiring location with sublime views of the prairie. The homestead site was used by the festival for tent dinners, for a sunrise gathering, and it continued to draw people informally for quiet respites.

The festival brings together local knowledge about Micheaux, outside scholars of his films and novels, and people from the region who identify with Micheaux's homesteading experience. Micheaux-related tours of the region and interactions with the Native American culture related to the local Rosebud Reservation are included. Scholars are provided with Micheaux documents (more each year), such as titles and deeds, copies of Micheaux's books with marginal notations, and newspaper clippings. The value of the festival was recognized early by the South Dakota Humanities Council and it has been corroborated by the national Federation of State Humanities Councils, who awarded this little festival the Schwartz Prize for the best state humanities council project of 1997.

Visitors included Micheaux scholars Pearl Bowser and Charlene Regester, South Dakota historian of black culture Ted Blakey, and South Dakota State University scholar of Native American culture Kathleen McNerney Donovan. Film producer Michael Unthank and television star James McDaniel were there to investigate and report on a possible film on Micheaux's life, and Pamela Thomas presented her television production *Midnight Ramble*, which focuses on Micheaux.

The 1998 festival will be held August 7, 8, and 9; information is available at 605-835-8002 or at P. O. Box 149, Gregory SD 57533.

J.R.G.

the depiction (in flashback) of Hawkins' testimony about the crime, the white manager flips Hawkins a coin, which causes Hawkins to go into a happy shuffle routine in front of the factory door. That "insert coin, get shuffle" trope practically turns Hawkins into a white man's living juke box. While the rape and supposed murder is occurring, Hawkins, trying to spy on the rape, tiptoes around the boss's office like a buffoon, accompanied by comic-movie music. Those scenes would fit seamlessly into an Abbott and Costello movie or the "Amos and Andy" television series.

Such examples suggest that the African-American attorney, Henry Glory, is fighting not just a specific injustice instantiated in a specific murder intrigue, but also the broader injustice of a social web that engenders both black caricature and lackeyism as generalizable traits.

In the interrogation scene, Micheaux's class hero, Glory, is in dramatic (and humorous) conflict with a representative of the proletariat, Hawkins. Such a reading, as far as it goes, would support criticisms of bourgeois identification leveled against Micheaux over the years (including official denunciations by the Communist Party in the 1930s). Such criticisms, however, were (besides being shockingly unskilled in elementary hermeneutics) too simple. Micheaux's class hero is clearly also fighting white racism and bourgeois capital, since those interests are represented by the factory manager, Brisbane, who forces Hawkins into complicity in the crime and pays him for it, and who is thus primarily responsible for Lem Hawkins' immediate predicament.

Micheaux's emphasis on Hawkins' caricatured buffoonery does, in fact, continue through the first half of the courtroom testimony, to the amusement of the African Americans who make up the courtroom audience. Even the part that reveals Brisbane's manipulations of Hawkins, with its "hilarious" images of Hawkins crying and playing the helpless victim, is treated explicitly for laughs, in spite of the distinctly unhilarious predicament Hawkins finds himself in—being implicated in the rape and murder of a white woman.

At that point, however, the narrative discourse begins a crucially significant modulation of its enunciation of Hawkins' character. Hawkins begins to reveal an impressive proletarian intelligence, and he begins to be recognized by the white boss, Brisbane, as potentially oppositional, and a dangerous adversary. Brisbane, and Micheaux's intended film audience, get a good look at the well-developed survival skills underlying Hawkins' caricature act.

The modulation of Hawkins' character in this scene is the most important reversal in the film in relation to issues of class and race. The whole gist of Glory's middle-class critique of Lem Hawkins is mitigated by Hawkins' revelation—under the pressure of Glory's interrogation—of Hawkins' own subjection by the criminal white manager. Even more important is Hawkins' revelation of his own proletarian intelligence in the face of that subjection. After all Hawkins' song and dance about his helplessness and inability to understand the intricacies of the plot in which he is becoming implicated, he shows that without a doubt he understands it all perfectly; thus, his song and dance had been "artful," in the old-fashioned sense of the term.

The first indication of Hawkins' perfect understanding comes shortly after Brisbane has pulled the incriminating note that he has been dictating to Hawkins out of Hawkins' hands, saying, "You'd never understand." Brisbane orders Hawkins to write another one, but Hawkins plays dumb and Brisbane says "Write another note, *dumbbell*." Hawkins responds with heavy irony, "Oh, write another note, dumbbell." The irony of Hawkins' response indicates he is not a dumbbell, and the dialogue that follows explicates and embellishes Hawkins' irony and his intelligence:

> Brisbane [dictates the second note to Hawkins]: "That tall Negro did this. He will try to lay it on the night. . ."
>
> Hawkins: "'He will try to lay it on the night. . .' I understands. The night, that's me [Hawkins is nightwatchman]. You mean, he will try to lay it on me. I understands it all now."
>
> [Hawkins nevertheless writes the dictated note; Brisbane nods his approval.]
>
> Hawkins: "Ah, I got it now, Mr. Brisbane. You did it, but you want them to think that Vance did and these notes will make them think that Vance did, but Vance, he tryin' to make 'em think that I did. 'Course you know I didn't, and you won't let 'em arrest me, but Vance, he be here tonight and if he finds her and calls the police, they goin' arrest him and maybe lynch him quick, then they ain't goin' never find out who killed her. Huh, I understands."
>
> Brisbane: "Yeah. You understands too damn much."[18]

After this impressive display of plot explication, Hawkins' irony escalates to sarcasm:

> Brisbane [reads the note and hands it back to Hawkins for a correction]: "Here, rub that 'a' out in 'Negro' and make it 'e.'"
>
> Hawkins [looks at the note]: "Uh, it seems to me that, that you ain't spellin' it like they calls it nohow. There should be an 'i' instead of an 'e' and there should be two 'g's instead of one." [Hawkins raises his eyes in a gesture of overtly fake innocence.]
>
> [Brisbane shifts uncomfortably, but says nothing. Hawkins finishes the note and Brisbane takes it with an approving gesture.]

Admittedly, Hawkins' intelligence is perverted and distorted by the history of racial oppression, and by his immediate predicament. And admittedly, Hawkins' resistance to Brisbane is not radically oppositional, since Hawkins accepts payment and reverts to caricature at the end of the scene. Nevertheless, the reversal of Hawkins' otherwise unmitigated buffoonery and lackeyism reveals his "darky" caricature as a cover—a dangerous cover—that has nothing to do with the essence of racial identity and everything to do with the necessities of survival under white oppression. And Micheaux's reversal reveals that under the right circumstances, such as Glory's forensic (and Micheaux's cinematic) interrogation, a race-based and class-based oppositionality that is disguised by the "joke" of caricature can show itself and can threaten oppositional action.

Thus Micheaux's treatment of caricature in lower-class figures is less cruel than it might seem, because Micheaux's interrogation leads to a pay-off: freedom. In the case of Hawkins, Glory's interrogation leads to Hawkins' release from white manipulation, and possibly from prison, execution, or lynching. Hawkins has already figured out that Brisbane's manipulative "syllogism," that begins, "You did it, but you want them to think that Vance did and these notes will make them think that Vance did [it]," includes the term, "Vance, he tryin' to make 'em think that I [Hawkins] did [it]." Thus Hawkins is explicitly at risk in Brisbane's plot and in the white judicial system. For this risk he must at least be paid.

The original title of the film, *Lem Hawkins' Confession*, specifically refers to the courtroom interrogation. The importance of the interrogation is reconfirmed in recent scholarship on Micheaux by a seeming coincidence of language that links the interrogation of Hawkins with the critical approach to race and class (and gender) that bell hooks has discovered in one of Micheaux's other films:

Ten Minutes to Live exploits all the conventions of simplistic melodrama even as it *interrogates* on multiple levels issues of representation. Nothing appears on the screen to be as simplistic as it often seems in everyday life. The capacity of individuals to discern good and evil, to distinguish that which is desirable and that which threatens, is *interrogated* [emphasis added].[19]

In *Murder in Harlem* that interrogation is made literal.

Conclusion

As hooks has implied, and as demonstrated above, the middle-class position for which Micheaux was working was neither a cabin in the cotton nor a mansion in the sky; it was not even a house in the suburbs. It was a critical, hard-nosed, working position. From that position, Micheaux interrogated entertainment as a function of class—not just in the self-reflexive ways of modernism that take entertainment as a secondary, cultural representation of a political situation; and not just in the Althusserian Marxist sense that takes entertainment as the secondary, sociocultural superstructure constructed on a primary base of political economics, but in a direct way that takes entertainment to be a literal, not just representational, sociopolitical condition inherent in the rube joke; inherent also in the idea of American "stage fright" (lack of experience on the world stage is "funny"); and inherent, as Hawkins signifies to Brisbane, in the racist "n" word. Micheaux chose not to ignore such negative images; for thirty years he gave audiences a working position from which to change the joke to slip the yoke.

■ J. Ronald Green teaches film studies in the Department of History of Art at Ohio State University. He has published extensively on Oscar Micheaux, has just completed a final draft of a book on Micheaux, is in the middle of a book on inexpensive cinemas, is beginning a book on "control-room movies," and writes occasional essays for *Afterimage* and other publications.

Notes

1. See *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter*, Charlene Regester and Jane Gaines, eds., Program in Film and Video, 107A Art Museum, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708. Phone (919) 684-4130 for up-to-date information, including preservation, distribution, and scholarship on Micheaux's films.
2. These stories are told in his novels, especially *The Conquest* and *The Homesteader*, both of which have been recently reprinted by the University of Nebraska Press.
3. See G.D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers, and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873).
4. See Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York: Oxford University Press,1977) for detailed discussions of efforts to produce a film to answer Griffith's.
5. Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 260-61.
6. Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest* (Lincoln, NB: Woodruff Bank Note Co.,1913; reprint, College Park, MD: McGrath Publishing Co., 1969; reprint, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 145.
7. Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown, 1988).
8. Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 98-99.
9. Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 122.
10. Ibid., p. 122.
11. See, for example, the discussion of racial self-respect in George Edmund Haynes' "The Trend of the Races" (New York, 1922) in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States: 1910-1932*, Herbert Aptheker, ed. (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1973), pp. 363-364. For example: "Enemies and some friends complain that Negroes show a lack of belief in their own race; that apparently their highest ambition is to be white. These criticisms apparently have basis in fact. They overlook, however, three cardinal conditions which Negroes confront. First, Negroes are surrounded by white people, ten to one, whose idea of physical beauty is a white skin, sharp features, and straight hair. By a well-known principle of group psychology the individuals in the minority tend to conform to the ideas and habits of the majority. . . .

"In the second place, whoever has observed and reflected upon facts open to everyday inspection knows that, on the one hand, to have white skin or to be known as a white man or woman is to have an open door to whatever ability and effort can achieve. . . . Negroes have had many of their attempts to set up their own standards blown to the winds by derision. The wonder is not that a few of them want to be white, but rather, that the race has so persistently clung to racial ideas and excellencies through so many generations.

"Finally, much of the white man's notion of what the Negro aspires to be is either an imaginative white man's construction of what he conjectures he would strive for, were he a Negro, or it is what some Negro has let the white gather in response to leading questions. The human mind

is habitually seeing the thoughts and feelings of others in terms of its own. The Negro is a master in responding to the white man according to the latter's wishes."

12. In a private phone conversation (April 26, 1996), Oscar Micheaux's grandniece, Mrs. Mildred Micheaux Lewis, who lives in Columbus, Ohio (see J. Ronald Green, "Micheaux Family Members," *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter*, Summer, 1996), stated that Oscar was "fair skinned," and that all of his brothers and sisters were fair skinned except Swan. Mrs. Lewis said that it was commonly understood in Micheaux's extended family that he was not dark. The evidence of photographs and films of Micheaux suggests otherwise, but such evidence is perhaps not as conclusive as one might assume. Clearly, most scholars and critics have assumed Micheaux was relatively dark.
13. For discussion of skin tone in Micheaux's work, see "Light Skin in Black Films," in Richard Grupenhoff's *The Black Valentino* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988), pp. 66-74; and "Oscar Micheaux and Racial Slur," J. Ronald Green and Horace Neal, Jr., *Journal of Film and Video* (Fall 1988), pp. 66-71.
14. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 13-15.
15. Jessie Fauset, "Some Notes on Color," *The World Tomorrow* (New York), March, 1922, pp. 76-77, in Aptheker, *A Documentary History*, p. 354.
16. Micheaux, *The Conquest*, p. 145.
17. Micheaux, *Philadelphia Afro-American*, January 24, 1925.
18. All transcriptions from the film, such as this one, have been made from a video copy purchased from Phoenix in New York. The source of their video copy is the film print of *Murder in Harlem* discovered in Tyler, Texas, by G. William Jones of the Southwest Film/Video Archives in Dallas.
19. bell hooks, "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness," *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991), p. 360.

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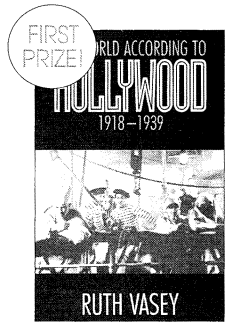

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UnSafe at Any Distance

Todd Haynes' Visual Culture of Health and Risk

For Steven Shaviro

After its screening at the Sundance film festival in January 1995 and its release later that summer, Todd Haynes' *Safe* elicited much commentary by critics and film scholars on the film's cinematographic techniques (few close-ups, many long takes) that distance spectators from the plight of the protagonist, Carol White, as she struggles with the increasingly horrifying symptoms of environmental illness, and thus render difficult, if not all together impossible, sympathetic identification with her. While this practice of stylized distance places Haynes within the tradition of independent cinema that has attempted to work against Hollywood's manipulation of the process of viewers' desires to identify with characters, many commentators fault *Safe* for either taking *too little* distance from its subject (the film remains captive of the Los Angeles suburban, white, upper-middle-class milieu it depicts) or *too much* (it is condescending or, worse, cruel toward the heroine).

But I want to claim that the distance Haynes establishes between the audience and the heroine is of a very different order. Careful consideration of *Safe*'s cinematography will show that Haynes, far from attempting to put viewers at a "safe" remove from the

temptations of facile audience identification, draws on our own willingness to be fascinated by and to identify with even the most contrived, artificial, or flat characters and environments while at the same time denying us the privilege of ever understanding them. Furthermore, the resulting tension between affective investment and uncertain knowledge constitutes the cinematic experience through which *Safe* intervenes in the contemporary U.S. discourses of health and risk that are currently configuring our bodies and the spaces they occupy. In other words, through the deployment of specific visual strategies, *Safe* offers an experience of spectatorship that entails a peculiar regime of viewership on the one hand and of knowledge, health, and illness on the other. *Safe* enacts a very Foucaultian reticence with respect to what one can see, know, and say about bodies and the subjectivities they are thought to enclose, and creates, for a brief moment, a cinematic space in which viewers are invited to feel and think "differently" about matters of health, chronic disease, and the environment.[1]

In particular, the film queers and goes against the grain of what could be called "a politics and epistemology of visibility" that operates at the intersection of practices of visual culture and of official and alternative medicine. A complex visual culture of health and risk marks the 1990s; within it exist many promises to define bodies, name potential but invisible health hazards, and, consequently, govern individual and collective behavior in terms of a "visibleness" that articulates personal experience with learned, expert discourse.[2] By contrast, *Safe*'s own practice of visibility no more affords comfortable positions for viewers (neither Hollywood's conventional identification nor avant-gardist ironic critique) than it allows comforting interpretations of Carol White's severe allergic reactions to her surroundings. *Safe* plays out the present-day experience of our bodies understood as sites of struggle between medical discourses, health-care practices, pathogens, and visual inscriptions.

Visual Cultures of Health and Risk

Just how *Safe* constitutes a properly cinematic intervention in contemporary discourses on health and bodies at risk can be gauged by turning briefly to a 10-second TV spot that has been widely aired in recent anti-smoking media campaigns sponsored by the California Department of Health Services (CDHS).[3] The spot features a vertically split screen with a gray background which is divided into two compartments titled "Smoking Section" (left) and "Non-Smoking Section" (right). As curling smoke drifts from left to right across the vertical line (filling both sections with thick smoke) against an ominous-sounding synthesizer in the background, a male voice-over ironically comments, "No matter what they tell you, smoke doesn't stay in the smoking section" (figure 1). The ad encapsulates environmentalist, public health, and alternative medicine's preoccupation with spaces and the bodies —from humans and animals to pathogens—that inhabit or circulate through those spaces. Here, secondhand smoke is the perfect health threat; like all too many pathogens from viruses and bacteria to environmental toxins, it freely violates the old boundaries and barriers meant to contain it and therefore requires new policies to combat and eradicate it.

By means of its visual narrative, this ad and others like it create an apparatus of perception and a field of visual knowledge that construct the place and identity of the knower (the health subject) and the known (potential illness) within that field. In this age of HIV/AIDS and undetectable environmental threats, the spot seizes upon the persistent uncertainties and social paranoia of dominant health discourses in order to elicit and satisfy in viewers the public health need to make visible and identify pathogens (here, tobacco smoke), infectious agents (smokers and the tobacco industry), and risk groups (non-smokers and the general population) and to extend to viewers reassuring matters of scientific fact (the discovery of environmental tobacco smoke, or ETS).[4]

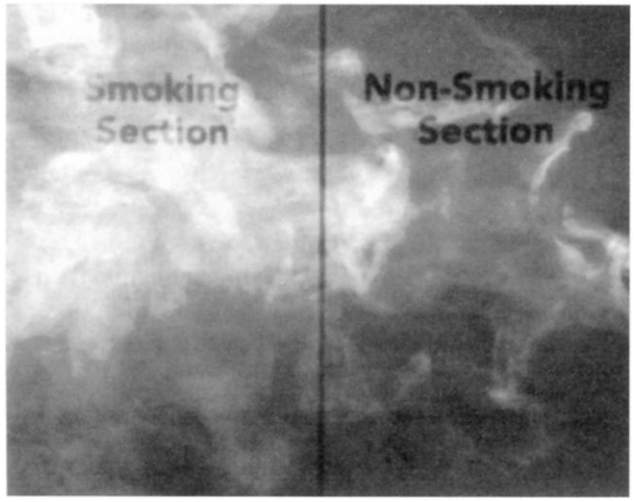


Figure 1: CDHS TV spot

In this spot, viewers get to watch a demonstration of scientific fact of remarkable clarity; new, expert knowledge of ETS is translated into a matter of everyday sight and common-sense perception which, we are told, "they"—the tobacco industry and many smokers—would like to deny. Here, before our very eyes, secondhand smoke is transformed into a threatening new entity. The ad's visuals construct a populist epistemology of visibility joined up with expert vision wherein to see is literally to know and wherein viewers are recruited as knowing and knowledgeable subjects in an effort to create a "tobacco-free" state.[5]

Ultimately, this visual health drama involves a full-blown projection of social space which inscribes a conception of democratic community defined in terms of commonalities of physical vulnerability and anxiety, a very contemporary condition which German sociologist Ulrich Beck has termed the "risk society."[6] According to Beck, everyday life of late 20th-century modernity is increasingly dominated by the intangible and incalculable consequences of thorough-going modernization processes of capitalist development.[7] Through its visual strategies, the TV spot exploits and contains both this crisis of visibility underwritten by current discourses of risk and the resulting tension between personal experience and expert vision by enacting a happy marriage between viewers' common-sense perception and scientific knowledge in which they mutually validate each other.

Not so with *Safe*. Haynes plots a different response to the contemporary world of invisible risks. He creates a cinema of visual and acoustic surfaces and spatiality upon which he plays out a less confident relation between health and knowledge. If, as Haynes and critics have claimed,[8] *Safe* is an AIDS film transposed to the eerily serene heterosexual utopia of white suburbia, it could be viewed as a film that articulates the disappointing experience of PWAs and AIDS activists' involvement in policy-making and the rewriting of HIV-based drug-protocol procedures of the early 1990s,[9] along with the growing tendency to view AIDS as a chronic illness whose "causes" lie in many factors besides HIV (other viruses and STDs).[10] As such, HIV/AIDS stands with environmental illness and other chronic diseases as so many contemporary assaults on the immune system whose effects cannot be captured by any one narrative or clinical account.

In *Safe*, common-sense and (scientific or nonscientific) expertise do not neatly fold into each other but rather remain in strained and even antagonistic relationship. Here, neither experts and filmmakers nor citizens and viewers have definitive answers. Haynes refuses to extend to the audience promises of the kind made by the public health spot and those contemporary discourses of health it draws on. As in the ad, image and sound track are almost everything in *Safe*, but the film eschews the all-knowingness of the populist epistemology of visibility and articulates in a different fashion our need to see, to know, and thus our desire to draw boundaries, purify, and segregate out pollutants and blamable, unhealthy others. As Haynes remarked in an *Artforum* interview, "*Safe* is a film that resists telling you what to think."[11] In this sense, *Safe* practices an "environmental" cinema of sorts in which not all toxins are industrial and biological; there are discursive and pedagogical ones as well.

Opaque Spaces and Bodies

Now, how do you introduce drama into the mythically sun-filled Los Angeles landscape, and, more especially, into the even more seamless suburbs of the San Fernando Valley? Conventionally, Hollywood has offered (to oversimplify somewhat) several cinematic solutions, ranging from the expressionist light-and-shadow play of film noir and the high contrast emotional states of domestic melodrama to, more recently, fast-action gang narratives. Generically, Haynes takes another route, a muted version of the horror film (a genre obsessed with the incalculable and the unforeseen), and focuses on the stylized blandness and perfection of suburban landscapes and interiors and intensifies them. *Safe* makes the flat characters and environments flatter still while heightening, as it were, the local pastels. It is in this sense that *Safe* stands somewhere between film noir and melodrama: throughout the film, light generally suffuses space evenly and empties out conventionally affective resonances of expressionist L.A. while emotional depth and inner thought receive minimalist dramatic development.

Two sets of surfaces attract the camera's eye. One is the composed suburban world of the San Fernando Valley circa 1987 and the other is, of course, Carol White (played by Julianne Moore), or better still, her body, face, and voice. The first space and its surfaces envelops the other: throughout *Safe*, the many long shots operate as a series of establishing shots of sorts to create a cinematic environment that always precedes White, anticipates her movements, and defines them. They are the frame she walks in and out of but

Figure 2: Julianne Moore as Carol White

rarely fills. Through stationary shots, *Safe* repeatedly confronts viewers with the very "thereness" of things and social relations that shapes White's world, and invites, almost dares us to find our way through the thicket of their materiality.

Take, for example, the credit sequence that features a traveling shot from the point of view of the front seat of a Mercedes as it noses down the utterly empty neighborhood streets at twilight. A brooding sound track creates suspense and dramatic depth. We know what happens in Hollywood when the sun goes down and there is the promise of a new game of light and shadow that follows the temporary erasing of their difference. A drug deal going down (it's a Mercedes after all)? But no, we're in suburbia, a guess that's confirmed when the car turns into the gated driveway of a large tract home. Or rather: we're in the land of serial killers, alien body snatchers, and zombies out to disrupt the stifling routines of upper-middle-class domesticity.[12]

Yet, cinematically, something else occurs: the synthesizer switches off and the camera shifts to a straight-on long shot of the garage as the car stops, the couple emerges, and the woman (Carol White) sneezes, exclaiming, "It's freezing in here." The couple enters the house and we are left staring mutely at the now dimmed garage. However, as the seconds tick away, the film's pace slackens, suspense flattens out, horror cues drop away, and the forward movement of the narrative is arrested by the dumbness of the decor. Is this yet another blank time before the eruption of horror? Is something hiding in there? No, nothing, nothing at all. The indifferent thereness of things has taken over and has nothing to say and anticipates the next scene in which Carol's husband Greg (Xander Berkeley) wordlessly makes love to Carol, oblivious to her and the distracted expressions on her face.

Or again, consider the sequence when Carol returns home from doing errands (figure 2). At first we don't see her at all. A stationary long shot presents us with the immaculately arranged sitting room between the front hall and the main living room; off-screen we hear the loud sound of a vacuum cleaner as Carol calls out to Fulvia, the maid, who doesn't answer. We idly take in the decor from a middle distance as the small figure of Carol makes her way from the entrance in the upper right frame. Everything in the frame is bathed by frontal lighting that eliminates most shadows. There are few secrets to be ferreted out and interpreted here, and the scene presents itself in all its legibility. In a single shot, Haynes condenses suburban social and gender relations (prerogatives and expectations of the Anglo—that is, white—housewife to be heard even in the midst of a din; the unacknowledged work of the Latina maid whose labor makes possible such an orderly arrangement of things). Haynes then plays with this static shot to build suspense (Carol can't find Fulvia, who still doesn't answer) and then releases it when Carol looks off-screen (toward the now backtracking camera) into the main living room and exclaims, "Oh, my God!" Has she discovered the blood-splattered body of her stepson in the spotless decor? A second long shot provides the answer: no, just an aesthetic horror. The wrong furniture had been delivered, a black couch that stares back at Carol, a mute stain on the pastel perfection of her house.

However, in deflating traditional audience expectations with respect to horror films, Haynes does not simply trade the possible terror, say, of the excesses of human psychopathology for the disgust of passive matter and the "frozen" social relations they embody—what Sartre called the inertia of the practico-inert—in this case, the built environments of white-flight suburbia. To be sure, the tease Haynes throws at viewers in this last scene suggests that the horror in the suburbs may just lie in their very way of life; that what disrupts the routine of orderly consumption is, as Baudrillard might say, the rule of objects themselves. Thus by making the everyday hyperreal and thus "stupid" and "strange," the many stationary long shots of suburban interiors throughout *Safe* would seem to fold the cinematic experience of those environments smoothly into an ironic critique of the superficiality and vacuousness of 1980s hyperconsumerist, control-obsessed professional middle-class culture. In this case, what you see in *Safe* is what

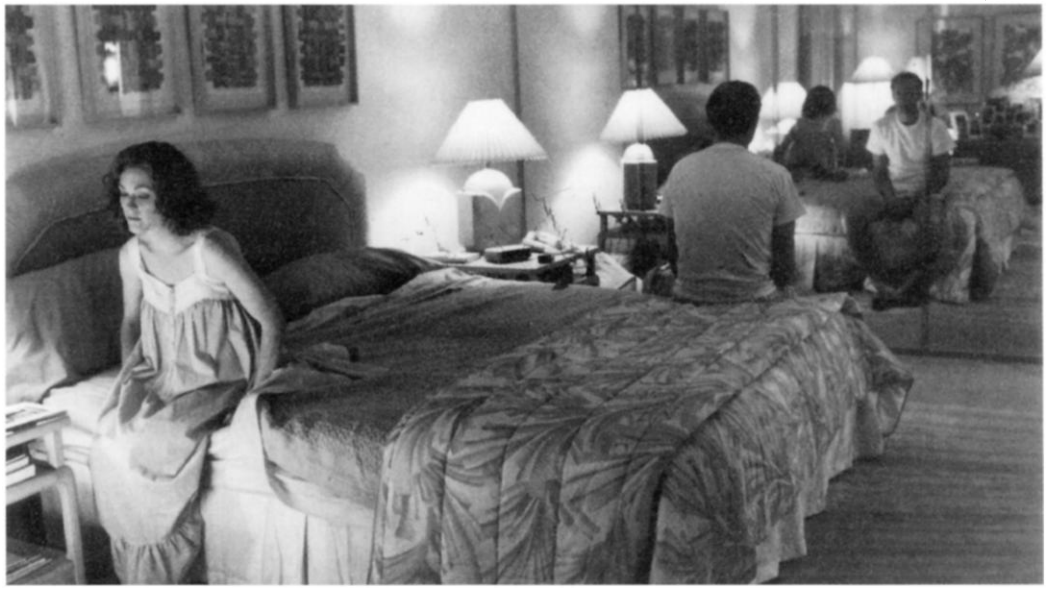
you get: the impression that you know all there is to be known about Carol and Greg and their world. "No matter what they (real estate agents, the Republican Party, Bill Clinton) tell you, there's no exaggerating the repressiveness of white-flight suburbs," a voice-over could say.

But Haynes isn't interested in performing a critique whose knowing gaze maintains the suburban environment at a hygienic distance. Self-congratulatory irony is not what *Safe* is all about; Haynes takes suburbia's kitsch environments very seriously—their power of appeal is here and cannot be made to disappear. Nor can that power of seduction simply be wished away. Indeed, as we stare at the screen during the drawn-out long shots, something *else* happens alongside the critique of controlled communities of the Reaganite 80s. The film lingers almost lovingly over the gorgeous surfaces of things. The carefully blended white, gray, and blue hues of most of the Valley interiors draw the eye to themselves even as they push it away by virtue of their perfection. Often, the slightly raised perspective establishes a position of mild dominance of the scene by the audience but, as the shot is drawn out, it is soon reversed by the objects that seduce our gaze just as they make it glance off them. Some *other* order dominates the environment that both appeals to us and yet doesn't invite ready negotiation. Rather, by virtue of its very clarity, the ordered interior imposes an unsettling passivity on viewers the longer they are made to stare at it. In spite of, or rather, *because* of the even illumination of all objects in the frame, we can see everything but we can't claim to know as much as we can see. Carol's domestic environment briefly becomes ours in all its fascination, strangeness, and bewildering necessity. In *Safe*, we look too much to be able to hold her world at a prophylactic remove through something called knowledge.

Moreover, the intense pleasures and private anxieties of fetishistic close-ups of these perfectly laid out objects are denied us. Rather, in the stylized long shots, we are captivated by the whole ensemble, and the usual details suggestive of some hovering, obsessed interiority are replaced by an asubjective fascination with the entire *structure* of objects: how does Carol (or how do we) consume, deal with, enjoy, get away from, make her (our) way through *it*? Here, the affect is utterly ambiguous: the entire decor is as attractive as it is oppressive.

Flat Characters

The question of subjectivity returns us to Carol herself. She is an updated version of the French novelist Flaubert's 19th-century heroine, Emma Bovary, the original "hysterical" housewife who is driven to suicide by the routines and restrictions of male-dominated domestic life in the provinces.[13] Like her predecessor, White discovers to her distress that her body and then her mind no longer fit her environment (a fact anticipated by the early love-making scene), and has few means at her disposal to articulate her predicament. Mysteriously, her body suffers asthma and panic attacks, nosebleeds, headaches, swollen eyes, anemia, and rashes as the equilibrium between her immune



Hygienic distance: Carol (Julianne Moore) and Greg White (Xander Berkeley)

system and her surroundings evaporates.[14] Slowly, Carol's body almost turns against her and mutates into something "other."

The "becoming other"[15] of her body to herself and to her family and friends through inexplicable illness, a fearsome prospect in the arrested environments of gated communities, registers unanswerable questions to current male-dominated knowledges from official medicine's family practitioners, psychiatrists, and allergists to alternative therapies offered by holistic self-care and New Age sanatoriums. Adopted and abandoned in frustration by a frightened Carol, they offer no more adequate knowledge of the body and its environment than did religion, medicine, literary romanticism, and early therapeutics to Emma Bovary 150 years earlier.

Still, Carol White is no Emma Bovary; she is much flatter. She possesses little of the French heroine's energy, driving desire, volatile imagination, or volubility. Carol doesn't dominate her husband, never takes a lover, (as far as we can tell) has no rich fantasy life, and is virtually inarticulate. When she does speak, others complete her sentences or name her thoughts and desires for her (sometimes at her prompting) when they don't simply interrupt her, as when for example, her female friend orders lunch for her or when her husband speaks for her in public spaces, or during those visits to the many doctors who ask her questions which they then answer themselves.[16]

Carol's utterly unremarkable personality has prompted some critics to claim that she's one of the emptiest female characters ever to appear on screen and anachronistically evokes in 1987 a world of women untouched by feminism (pre-1970)[17]; or that Carol stands as the unsettling expression of the director's latent misogyny.[18] In response I want to argue two things. First, Carol's routine existence as a homemaker, by virtue of its abstract simplicity, enables Haynes to focus on the bewildering materiality of the people and objects that are her world. As the camera follows her daily activities from home to the Valley malls and back again, it builds a compelling visual rhythm between public and private space whose affect of creeping claustrophobia and agoraphobia is crucial to Haynes' focus on physical and cultural environments. The displacements of, say, a middle-class professional from home to office to meetings, restaurants, airports, planes, other cities, etc., would have disrupted the camera's very aesthetic and accelerated the film's visual pace; and the protagonist's succumbing to environmental illness would have perhaps produced a melodrama or tragedy of interrupted ambition and stymied action (rather common in disease-of-the-week films) rather than one of the quiet terror of immune disorder.

Second, and more important, while the figure of Carol White may seem to replicate a sexist definition of women (as passive, empty vessels), she exceeds being simply a type precisely by virtue of being made so extremely flat. The possible roles of caring mother, dutiful wife, household emotional manager, and overseer of domestic space are systematically underplayed by Julianne Moore; but neither does she wind up as the disturbing bad housewife. She doesn't follow either trajectory even as the reactions of the men in her circles are typical and paternalistic. Moreover, she cannot be termed simply a victim (of her allergies, pollutants, her repressed desires, her position as a woman, her class, the suburban environment, her husband, and the male health-care experts). Nor is she sexualized by the camera.[19] Indeed, what the camera and Moore deliver is an ethereal body whose translucent skin matches the flatness of Carol's character. She is the contemporary "flexible" body scripted as permeable membrane.[20]

Carol thus makes few claims upon viewers' attention or investment as a cultural or cinematic type, or, for that matter, as a woman endowed with an intriguing interiority and striking physical presence. In fact, had *Safe* created such claims, more viewers might have rejected her out of hand as an uninteresting housewife and the other claims *Safe* makes upon us might have been lost. In this sense, it is difficult to say exactly who or what Carol White is that puts her beyond the figure of a well-intentioned homemaker. Whence, I would argue, her power of fascination: she's at once a stereotype and something "other" that queers it and draws us in. She's been transformed into what Deleuze and Guattari call a "singularity"—something in excess of type, category, or explanatory cause—which compels our attention.[21]

Many of these effects are secured by the camerawork in conjunction with Moore's acting style. As previously suggested, the numerous long shots, which repeatedly frame Carol right through the second half of the film (when she moves to Wrenwood, the New Age retreat in the New Mexican desert), defer the usual investment in her thoughts and physical movements. Interiority and body features are not intimately or provocatively sculpted by the camera, which remains steadfastly deadpan and unintrusive. This visual strategy is complemented by Moore's body postures and by the trailing voice and rising intonation with which she speaks Carol's declarative utterances,

infusing them with a haunting, "feminine" self-doubt. And when the film delivers (medium) close-ups, it is only infrequently, and viewers find themselves gazing at an inexpressive upper body and face subtly troubled by hints of discomfort.

This is especially true of those moments involving reverse shots of Carol when she is either listening or being addressed, as when, for example, she can't decide what to order for lunch with her friend, or those scenes when she doesn't join in the laughter at a crude joke about vibrators, follows a public lecture on environmental illness, listens to Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman), the guru of Wrenwood, giving a speech welcoming new "long-timers" to his retreat (figure 3), or, finally, addressing herself, repeats the refrains of self-love taught her at the retreat. In these scenes and others like it, Carol's face varies between a blank look and something like a wide-eyed squint (that becomes accentuated as her face and eyes puff up) which denote at once radical passivity, emerging discomfort, and some sort of attempt to figure out what is being said to her.

Carol's minimalist presence, like the mute decor in which she lives, is profoundly ambiguous in its affect. The longer we catch her in these (medium) close-ups, the more the camera invites us to scan her face and body for signs of emotion and inner thoughts, the less we know about her. And the more dramatic become her allergic reactions. There are intimations of something (the squint; later, her rashes) but we don't know for sure what it is. She begins to intrigue us and all the more in that Carol replicates not only the very opacity of her environment to viewers but also, as the film unfolds at its slow pace and her symptoms accumulate, the very experience of viewing *Safe*: she no more understands herself, her illness, and her world than we do.

This is what helps save her from the potential wrath of irritated viewers who, as they follow her around searching for answers to her allergic reactions to virtually everything in her suburban environment, are momentarily placed in the position of those male experts who attempt to explain what ails her and to relieve her symptoms. As one critic points out, *Safe* provides us plenty of ammunition for judging Carol condescendingly, but in the end we don't, or at least not for very long; the men's advice or pronouncements are too patronizing, too brutal, or simply inadequate.

As Carol's bewilderment and horror grows, we drop our impatience; our fascination for her and her appalling situation deepens, and our uneasy identification intensifies. As we watch *Safe*, our viewing experience shifts and is anchored less in a knowledge or a subjectivity (Carol's or ours) than in her inexplicably ill body and the contagious fascination and terror it provokes.

Figure 3: Welcome speech

Haynes achieves here with Carol White's vacuous character something analogous to what he did with the Barbie and Ken dolls in his 1987 film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*: he capitalizes on the power of popular culture and Hollywood's stereotypes to articulate viewers' most intimate fears and desires in order to elicit a particular mode of audience identification with the heroine, or better still, with the fate of her body.

It is important to stress that Carol's eerie passivity is not lack of action (she actually attempts to take care of her body), but is rather a passivity more radical, more disturbing, which insidiously becomes our own: something larger than herself (and ourselves) that has already overtaken her (the indifferent "thereness" of objects and people) and as something else that has just begun to pervade her body (her illness and the discourses that claim to diagnose it), removing all sense of "safety" for Carol and us alike. As film scholar Carol J. Clover would say, our "witnessing body" merges with Carol's suffering body.[22] Hence the film's peculiar creeping paranoia, which, like the muted horror of a slowly disintegrating immune system, gently builds not on the traditional basis that one *should* be able know everything (but can't), but on the unsettling basis that one can never presume to know all the factors involved in chronic illness (and perhaps it is even destructive to desire to claim to).

Still, the audience's identification with Carol is an uneasy one, I would argue, and never complete, by virtue of the cinematic techniques upon which it is

based. The distance that fascinates also keeps us at a remove. This fundamental ambiguity brilliantly approaches the *affect* of Carol's "becoming other" through environmental illness—to her terror as well as ours. She is and is not herself, and we are and are not Carol White (and that sick, dying body). However, this split doesn't open a space of controlling irony but rather one of unsettling passivity and uncertain agency.

It's as if Haynes, in his intervention in current discourses of health and knowledge, decided to exploit the affective and bodily vulnerabilities built into cinematic spectatorship—as described by Clover (for the horror genre) and by Steven Shaviro (for cinema in general)—so as to immerse us more fully into a world of incalculable environmental risks, threatened identities, and partial knowledges. Weaving together Blanchot's concept of fascination and Benjamin's notion of shock effect, Shaviro stresses "the basic tactility and viscerality of cinematic experience."[23] He writes:

> The overwhelming experience of visual fascination in the cinema, what Blanchot calls "passion for the image," is one of radical passivity. I do not have power over what I see, I do not even have, strictly speaking, the power to see; it is more that I am powerless not to see. The darkness of the movie theater isolates me from the rest of the audience, and cuts off any possibility of "normal" perception. I cannot willfully focus my attention of this or on that. Instead, my gaze is arrested by the sole area of light, the flux of moving images. I am attentive to what happens on the screen only to the extent that I am continually distracted, and passively absorbed by it. I no longer have the freedom to follow my own train of thought.[24]

Now, one could claim that Haynes substitutes a drama, or even a tragedy, of female inarticulateness for the female heroics, which, according to Clover, close many contemporary slasher and rape-revenge films.[25] Clearly, Julianne Moore's Carol White is no triumphant "final girl" who, no longer a victim, dispatches her tormentor. However, even more clearly, I would argue, *Safe* is not a drama of articulation either, in which everything is made to turn on characters' ability to know, to speak, and to be heard. The film's mise-en-scène and cinematography don't extend the middle-class promise that all would turn out fine if only we had the education, the intelligence, and the opportunity to enunciate our desire and to identify the problems confronting us. Clarity of thought, finally, is not at issue.

For, if Carol's ability to articulate what is happening to her self leads her away from standard medical treatment, it also leads her eventually to Wrenwood, where her physical self is made to disappear all together (even as the lesion on her face grows) as Peter incites her to speak of her illness in terms of self-hatred. That is the danger and even the fundamental promise of speech and knowledge shared by both Wrenwood and the Valley experts: to make the disturbing opacity of the body and its environment go away. Thus radiant Peter, a (presumably gay) man with AIDS, eerily bears no signs of the struggle with opportunistic infections that define the syndrome. Here, to paraphrase a French 19th-century pathologist, "health" is life lived in the silence of the body.[26]

One of the ironies of the film, of course, is that not only does Carol flee, oxygen tank in tow, the vast but suffocating toxic spaces of the Valley for the even wider spaces of Wrenwood only to relegate herself, finally, to the "freedom" of her chemical-free, porcelain-lined cell (whose spare decor replicates the hues of her Valley home); she also rids herself of one set of discursive and social toxins (family medicine, psychiatry, and heterosexual marriage) only to absorb another (Wrenwood's holistic refrains), what Shaviro calls "the real estate development of . . . inner psychological space."[27]

Still, in *Safe*, no single regime of knowledge, speech, and power ever totalizes the body's becomings and the subjectivity it is thought to enclose. This is what Carol reminds viewers near the end of the film. Asked to make a speech by fellow Wrenwood residents who have just thanked her for the meal she cooked with Chris (another resident) and wished her happy birthday, she replies,

> I can't; I've never made a speech in my life. [pause] I just want to thank Chris for doing this, and everybody here; it just pulled me through a really hard period. Anyway, I couldn't have done it without you. [applause] I don't know what I'm saying, just that I really hated myself before I came here. And, umm, so I'm trying to see myself hopefully, umm, more as I am, more, umm, more positive, like seeing the pluses, like, I think, it's slowly opening up now, people's minds. Like, umm, educating, and AIDS, and, umm, and other types of diseases, 'cause, 'cause, and it is a disease, 'cause it's out there, we just have to be more aware of

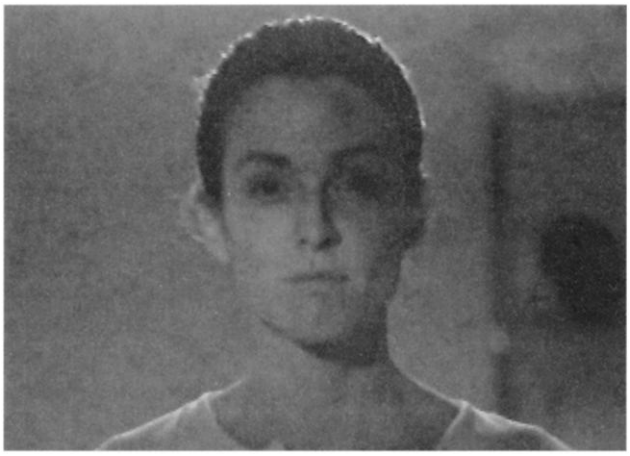


Figure 4: "I love you, I really love you. . . ."

it, umm, with . . . people aware of it, and, umm, even ourselves, like going . . . reading labels and going into buildings."

In the very moment Carol demonstrates that she has begun to learn the lessons of Wrenwood, her speech starts to slip beyond psychologizing, New Age pieties to name other possible causes of her chemical sensitivity (food additives, household objects, building materials, etc.), and, consequently, other possible courses of (collective) action. Carol then stands mute, as if searching for her words. After a long pause, Peter raises his glass and toasts, "To Carol." At which point she is left to return to her new safe house to try out repeating in front of a mirror (the camera) that reflects her blemished features, "I love you, I really love you, I love you." She then falls silent, her expressionless face gazing at her reflection in a medium close-up as we stare (back) at her for a full 20 seconds before the screen goes dark (figure 4).

Haynes' Regime of Visibility

Safe's closing scene returns us to the questions with which I began this essay: regimes of visibility and the nature of Haynes' cinematic intervention into contemporary (visual) discourses of health. What is it that viewers "see," "know," or "learn" in this last shot? Many critics have read this scene as a straightforward critique of ideological mystification or misrecognition, and some of them, like Roy Grundmann, have faulted it for giving viewers leave to feel pity or even contempt for Carol for succumbing to Wrenwood's brainwashing: that the gap between what Carol says ("I love you") and perhaps sees (a beautiful body?) and what we see (the growing lesion on her forehead) places us in a superior, even sexist subject position. According to these interpretations, the film indulges in the pleasures of dramatic irony or smug cynicism at her expense.[28]

I think such criticisms constitute a serious misreading not only of the final sequence but also of the affective and epistemological dynamics of the entire film, with which the last shot is in harmony. To begin with, the last scene must be read in tandem with the one in the dining hall: what Carol appears to have learned at the retreat is by no means simply Wrenwood orthodoxy. Moreover, her repetition of the phrases of self-love resembles more an ongoing practice of a technology of the self than a scene of definitive recognition or misprision. During the entire close-up, Moore maintains Carol's wide-eyed squint and not once does she intimate, let alone break into, a smile of self-recognition.[29]

Far from engaging us in the cruel satisfactions of superior irony, our ambivalent fascination deepens for that body (and that subject) that is no self-contained, impermeable vessel but rather, as it exercises its uncertain agency, finds itself open and porous to the outside—be it toxins, viruses, suburbia, New Age culture, mainstream medicine, heterosexuality, or, for that matter, the power of visual forms like the cinema itself. All too "flexible," Carol's body is a permeable membrane that risks being overrun by its environment. Here, flexibility, which Emily Martin has described as the hallmark of superior immune systems and of the enterprising and imperial self in contemporary U.S. discourses—endlessly adaptable and thus capable of going anywhere—flips into its opposite, the inflexible and restricted mode of existence of chemical sensitivity.[30] In this scene as in others, *Safe* plays with our need to see and to know illness and, consequently, with our desire to name health threats, erect barriers, eliminate vulnerabilities, and "other" the sick and the potentially ill.

To be sure, *Safe* offers knowledges through its own practices of visibility. Thus, for example, the final scene's startling clash between what our eyes tell us (Carol looks terrible) and our ears report (she says she loves herself) arouses contempt not for Carol but for Wrenwood's crude manipulation of sick residents' hopes and fears. Moreover, *Safe* doesn't refrain from providing standard visual and acoustic cues to guide audiences' reactions to the oblivious men who dominate Carol's life (through the suggestive high- and low-angle shots), to the possible presence of environ-

Figures 5 and 6: Asubjective point-of-view shots

mental toxins (signaled by a foreboding synthesizer), or to the momentous stages in Carol's struggle with her illness (brooding sound track). These conventional cues build a hermeneutics of suspicion that invites us to scan the decor and characters for possible signs of abuse, illness, or horror, and, often, the film does satisfy our need to know and to see: the men's indifference and overconfidence do threaten, Carol does indeed react to small traces of chemicals, and her immune system does fail.

Even so, just as the cinematic distance established by *Safe* is of a different order, so, too, are the knowledges that the film proposes: they are, to echo Donna Haraway, partial knowledges based on singular, if utterly intense, vision.[31] Take, for example, those shots that invite viewers to identify possible environmental causes of Carol's malady. Often the angle is such that the point of view can't be situated either from a position of omniscience or from a strictly subjective one. Thus, in those moments when the shots reverse back and forth between Carol's gaze looking out of a car window and images of power lines and rusting storage tanks located in background planes, the angle shifts too much to ascribe what viewers see and know to any one cinematic position (figures 5 and 6). These asubjective point-of-view shots, so to speak, hover between giving us the facts, ascribing these facts to Carol, who is only now figuring them out, and simply dismissing them as the imaginings of an upset, sick woman.

As so often in *Safe*, the dramatic depth and the promised hermeneutic satisfactions prove to be of an uncertain nature. Even when the film appears to reject out of hand health-care experts and their brutal methods, ambiguity persists. One of the film's most unbearable scenes is Carol's violent reaction to an allergen administered by a mainstream allergist who then sits back in a posture of clinical detachment. We watch as he makes *her* all too visible body (the writhing body of affect and pain) disappear in favor of his specialty's body whose symptoms can be, in his words, "turned on and off like a switch." Yet, he is the only standard medical practitioner who even begins to take seriously Carol's allergies, and she then begins her own search into holistic allergy therapy.

Or again, to return to Wrenwood and the concluding shot, can we confidently say that Carol hasn't benefited from the retreat's alternative therapies? Her facial rash may be spreading, but other symptoms (coughing, anemia, headaches, asthma, and panic attacks) have apparently diminished. And this brings us back to Peter's glowing face and energetic demeanor and the general question of what it is that we want to see and to know. He may be perhaps the most contemptible and cruel man in the film, but his unsettlingly healthy appearance also asks us the question of what it is we truly know about AIDS and its symptoms and what it is we wish to see or have made visible in PWAs or other chronically ill people. What regime of visibility do we desire? and what desires are satisfied by our regime of visibility?

Far from proposing yet one more other-worldly practice of health and knowledge or a cinema beyond the pleasures and delights of popular film, *Safe*'s regime of visibility inscribes a contemporary world of opaque material relations within which it resolutely situates itself. Like the TV spot examined earlier, *Safe* entails a full-blown projection of social space. As the film's visual rhythm slowly takes us back and forth between long shots of private and public spaces, Carol's immune system gradually breaks down. Claustrophobia and agoraphobia take hold and fold

into one another to the point that the *cordon sanitaire* between city and suburb, suburb and desert, the household and the world outside, one's body and those of other people, vanishes.

As critics have noticed, it is hard to tell what single factor makes Carol ill—her husband's obliviousness, the housewife's routinized existence, the oppression of other men, cleaning fluids, industrial waste, what have you. In *Safe*, a new set of environmental pollutants—chemical, biological, social, discursive—are imposing their own order and, as a consequence, space implodes. Carol's multiple chemical sensitivity registers the collapse of modernist geography that was confident it could locate, make visible, and thus control social, biological, and ideological dangers. (Thus, there is the episode when Carol dizzily pulls out of traffic into a parking garage—that modernist space of urban anomie, illicit encounters, rapes, and rub-outs—to escape a truck spewing smoke; the parking structure offers her the temporary respite from pollutants which her home no longer affords her.)

The crisis of visibility in *Safe*, as in the public health spot, is always already a crisis of space. It is also a crisis of agency. As Beck argues, the collapse of social space brought on by the proliferating risks in developed (and developing) countries entails a collapse of human agency:

> There is . . . emerging a new global ascription of risks, against which individual decisions hardly exist for the simple reason that the toxins and pollutants are interwoven with the natural basis and elementary life processes of the industrial world.

However, whereas the anti-smoking spot dissolves built space associated with older social relations and ineffectual smoking policies so as to elicit the mobilizing hope of a tobacco-free society and to extend the promise of final solutions, the film's cinematic strategies of making visible make no promises even as they play with our desire to see, to know, and thus to act. *Safe*, I would argue, doesn't offer the certainties of safety or effective action so willingly proffered by many real estate agents, health-care practitioners, or for that matter, those critics practicing confident critiques.

In the same passage from which I quoted above, Beck, writing from a Habermasian perspective, asks, in almost panicked tones, "Is it at all possible to create and maintain a critical distance towards things one cannot escape?"[32] *Safe* evinces no such nostalgia for an autonomous sphere of critical thought posed as the precondition of any praxis. In the world *Safe* claims for Carol, itself, and viewers, there are no safe social spaces, no safe health-care practices, no safe critical perspectives, and, lest we forget, no safe cinema.[33] There's even no safety from succumbing to nostalgia for the shelters afforded by modernist space.

The pragmatic dead ends of risk society constitute the givens of *Safe*, its point of departure, for, finally, *Safe*'s ethnographic respect of the present is too great: it takes far too seriously the shifting nature of our built environments and the vulnerabilities of our bodies. Their inextricably entangled materiality, in all its quiet horror and fascination, constitutes the thicket of things and people through which Carol—and we along with her—is already making her way.

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Notes

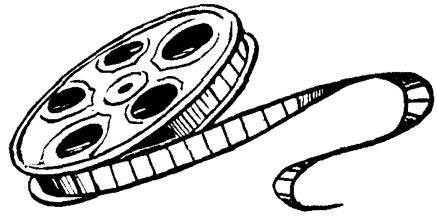
This essay has benefited from discussions with the following people, whose remarks and criticism have been essential: Lisa Bloom, Linda Brodkey, Constance Penley, Steven Shaviro, Paula Treichler, and Linda Williams.

1. On "thinking differently" (*penser autrement*), see Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1986), pp. 8-9; on the regulatory effect of "health," see *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1980), pp. 122-25.
2. The present essay may be seen as an attempt to show what kind of analysis is made possible by combining current questions in film studies with recent work in cultural studies, especially cultural studies of science, technology, and medicine. For a complex study of the overlapping visual cultures of medicine and the cinema, see Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); see also Emily Martin, "The Body at War: Media Views of the Immune System," in *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston: Beacon,, 1994), pp. 64-81; and Donna Haraway, "The Politics of Postmodern Bodies: The Constitution of Self in Immune Discourse," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 203-30.
3. CDHS anti-smoking media campaigns were first inaugurated in April 1990 and continue to this very day.
4. For an in-depth analysis of ads targeting secondhand smoke, see Roddey Reid, "Healthy Families, Healthy Citizens: the Politics of Speech and Knowledge in the California Anti-Secondhand Smoke Media Campaign," *Between Life and Death*: special issue of *Science as Culture* 29 (1997): 541-81.

5. See California Department of Health Services, "Toward a Tobacco Free California" (s.l. 1995).
6. Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Mark Ritter, trans. (London: Sage, 1992).
7. Ibid., pp. 22-23. Various discourses of public health and of alternative medicine (self-care, self-help, and holistic movements) have also contributed to this modern sense of "danger as risk" (to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Mary Douglas). These discourses are characterized, in the words of sociologist David Armstrong, by preventive health's focus on the "semi-pathological, pre-illness at risk state" and, consequently, by "the discovery of danger everywhere." The body located in this space by popular and learned discourses is what Emily Martin calls the "flexible body," the body conceived as a permeable membrane of sorts whose defense lies in the "flexibility" of its immune system. See Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 14; David Armstrong, "Public Health and the Fabrication of Identity," *Sociology* 27.3 (1993): 407; and "The Rise of Surveillance Medicine," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 17.3 (1995): 401; Robert Crawford, "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life," *International Journal of Health Services*, 10.3 (1980): 365-88; and Martin, passim.
8. Manohla Dargis, "Endangered Zone: With *Safe*, Director Todd Haynes Declares His Independence," *The Village Voice*, 4 July 1995: 39.
9. The film also articulates the disappointment with alternative therapies, including (as Haynes himself notes) the recourse to New Age psychotherapy that claimed that the return to health depended solely on PWAs willpower and self-esteem. See "Diary of a Sad Housewife: Collier Schorr Talks with Todd Haynes," *Artforum* (Summer 1995): 128.
10. Thus, the relative visibility of the "cause" of human immune deficiency assumed by the proponents of HIV testing and research has now been compromised and shrouded in uncertainty; and even the legible marker of AIDS (and gayness) in the media, popular culture, and the covers of many medical textbooks on AIDS—the purple welts of Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) melodramatically displayed by Tom Hanks in Jonathan Demme's film, *Philadelphia* (1993)—turns out to have a viral origin that is not HIV. On the "spectacle of AIDS," see Simon Watney, *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings and HIV/AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 46-59; see also Paula Treichler, "How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: The Evolution of AIDS Treatment Activism," in Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, eds., *Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 57-106; Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); John Nguyet Erni, *Unstable Frontiers: Technomedicine and the Cultural Politics of "Curing" AIDS* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). Finally, it must be noted that renewed optimism concerning combination drug therapies emerged in August 1996 following the annual International AIDS Conference held in Vancouver, British Columbia.
11. Haynes, "Diary," 126.
12. See Robin Wood, "An Introduction to American Horror Film," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 195-200.
13. The intertextual references to Flaubert's novel are numerous, beginning with Carol's exclamation of how the cold the garage is, which replicates Emma's reaction to the recently plastered walls of her new home in Tostes, a small town to which she and Charles have moved in order to cure her of "vapors." In the *Artforum* interview, Haynes even goes so far as to echo Flaubert's famous *boutade*, "Emma Bovary, c'est moi!": "'So is Carol you?' Haynes: 'Yeah, I think she is'" (p. 88).
14. On health as a symbiotic equilibrium or relationship between an organism and its environment see René Dubos, *Mirage of Health: Utopias, Progress, and Biological Change*, 1959 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 62-128.
15. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 233-309; see also Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 93-141; Rosi-Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 111-123.
16. In this sense, Carol stands as something of a synthesis of Emma and her inarticulate husband Charles.
17. Constance Penley, private conversation.
18. Janet Maslin, "Life of a Hollow Woman," *New York Times*, 23 June 1995: B1. I do wonder, however, whether Haynes isn't enjoying a private joke about heterosexual Jewish men's fascination with well-brought-up blonde shiksas in the context of suburban assimilation.
19. The only possible exception is the early love scene, but its very awkwardness drains it of any eroticism.
20. See note 7.
21. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 156 and 408; see also Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Michael Hardt, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). The preceding paragraphs owe much to conversations with Lisa Bloom and Linda Brodkey.
22. Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 52.
23. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 50. For Clover, see *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, pp. 21-64.
24. Ibid., p. 47.
25. Clover, pp. 35-64.
26. R. Leriche, quoted by Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, Carolyn R. Fawcett, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Zone/MIT Press, 1989), p. 91.
27. "Safe," in *Stranded in the Jungle* (http://dhalgren.english.washington.edu/~steve/Stranded/02.html). More could be said than space permits about the film's complex cinematography and mise-en-scène, which shift somewhat in the section devoted to Wrenwood. In contrast to the first part, there are more tracking shots of Carol suggesting perhaps her greater agency; moreover, warmer browns, tans, and greens suffuse the decor but fascinate less, and intimate the very hope extended to Wrenwood residents of human community, shared understanding, mutual support,

and renewed inner life made possible by the natural setting. One key sequence features a lengthy middle-distance shot of Carol's wood cabin to which she returns after the welcoming ceremonies. From the outside we can see everything; the cabin appears utterly open and transparent to residents and viewers alike (no security-obsessed community here), while Carol stands alone inside, stares frame left, and bursts into tears. From frame right enters Claire, the associate director, who consoles Carol by hugging her, recounting her own story, and teaching her the phrase of self-love that Carol will repeat at the film's end.

28. Roy Grundmann, "How Clean Was My Valley: Todd Haynes' *Safe*," *Cineaste* 21.4 (1995): 25.
29. Foucault once remarked with respect to New Age arts of existence that "most people think if they do what they do, if they live as they live, the reason is they know the truth about desire, life, nature, and so on." (In Herbert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983], p. 236.) In *Safe*, Peter knows the "truth" of self-hatred and Carol makes awkward attempts to embody it.
30. Martin, *Flexible Bodies*, pp. 47-112.
31. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, pp. 188-96.
32. Beck, p. 41.
33. I have been struck by reactions of colleagues who, when they express their admiration of the film, nonetheless strive to distance themselves from it by claiming that *Safe* is, in the end, only a California narrative (i.e., *not* about the Midwest or the East Coast) or, failing that, only a Los Angeles story (*not* about Palo Alto, Berkeley, or San Francisco).



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Reviews

Smoke

Director: Wayne Wang. Screenplay: Paul Auster. Cinematographer: Adam Holender. Editor: Maisie Hoy. Music: Rachel Portman. Miramax.

Auggie Wren (Harvey Keitel) owns a cigar shop that is frequented by Paul Benjamin (William Hurt), a novelist suffering writer's block as a result of his wife's death. When Paul leaves Auggie's shop one day, he absentmindedly steps off the curb into moving traffic. He is nearly run over, but he is rescued by a young man who calls himself Rashid (Harold Perrineau, Jr.). In an attempt to balance the cosmic scales of kindness ("It's a law of the universe"), Paul offers to buy Rashid a cup of coffee. Although we are not given any indication that Rashid is a runaway or is in any sort of trouble, Paul suspects or intuits this, and consequently suggests that Rashid stay with him for a few days. Paul becomes increasingly concerned about and fond of Rashid, so he asks Auggie to give him a job at the cigar shop. Their lives joined by fate, these three men go on to develop an intimately platonic relationship that explodes male stereotypes and bends gender boundaries. Each is both a father and a son to the others; each helps the others come to terms with the emotional realities of the past.

Why call this movie *Smoke*, then? Despite the apparent incongruity between plot and title, Wayne Wang and Paul Auster's film is aptly named. Clearly, the fact that Auggie's cigar shop is central to the film would provide a logical connection to the title, but a less tangible association is established in one of the early scenes of the film. Paul comes into the cigar shop, interrupting a heated discussion among Auggie's other regular customers. Auggie greets Paul, explaining that he and the other men have been having a "philosophical discussion about women and cigars." Paul's contribution to the conversation is an anecdote establishing Queen Elizabeth as the one who made smoking fashionable: Queen Bess, it seems, was friendly with Sir Walter Raleigh, the man who brought tobacco to England for the first time, and it was her passion for cigars that led to their distribution throughout the court. Paul goes on to tell the story of how Raleigh once made a bet with the queen that he could "measure the weight of smoke." The notion that someone could measure such a thing seems crazy: "It's like weighing air," one man claims. "It's almost like weighing someone's soul," Paul counters. This early association between smoke and the soul is made in an offhand, seemingly insignificant comment, but it informs the remainder of the film. *Smoke* becomes a representation of all that is ethereal, intangible, elusive, and opaque; it is what escapes us. Nevertheless, Paul goes on to explain precisely how Raleigh weighed smoke: he weighed a cigar, then smoked it, placing all the ashes on the scale with the unsmoked butt. The difference in the two weights was the weight of the smoke; the presence of the smoke was measured

"Rashid" (Harold Perrineau, Jr.) with Paul (William Hurt, right)

by its absence. In this short anecdote, then, Paul establishes both that smoke is elusive and that we devise clever ways to reign it in. We attempt to make the intangible more familiar, but we cannot entirely do so; in attempting to capture the unknowable, we only highlight the absence that lies at the center of our knowledge. Having been forewarned, then, that systems of containment are inherently unstable, we may view the film through a postmodern lens, calling into question that which seems certain, and exploring that which is hazy and inconclusive.

Because language is the most basic of human attempts to make known the unknowable, it seems appropriate here to discuss how the postmodern aesthetic operates at this level. It claims that

> in the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things, and we suffer from doubt and anxiety as to our capacity to do so because of the limits of language itself.[1]

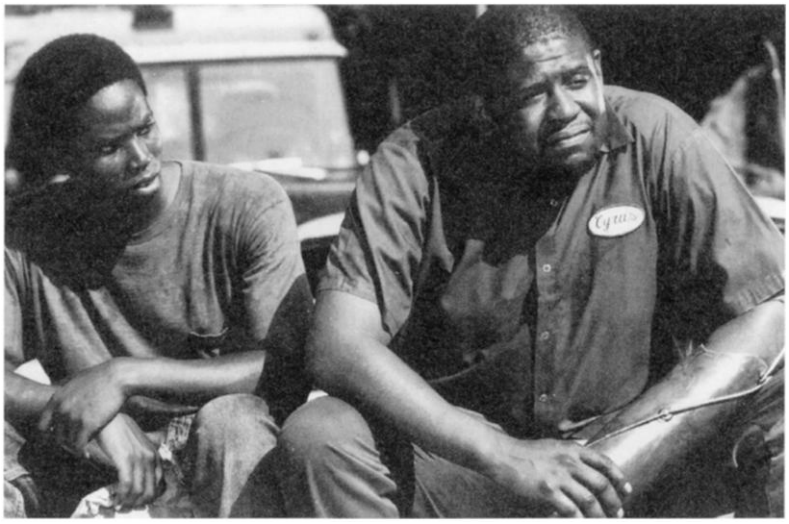
That this attempt to re-present experience is necessarily inadequate to its task is not, in this paradigm at least, a failure; it is, instead, "merely a disguise for other virtues."[2]

It is precisely this inadequacy of representation that this film celebrates via the smoke metaphor. In one scene, after Rashid explains why he needs to stay out of his own neighborhood for a while, he says that the one-mile physical distance between the projects and Manhattan affords an infinitely larger cultural distance: "Black is black and white is white, and never the twain shall meet." He verbalizes the binary that the culture has established. Paul replies, "Well, it looks like they've met in this apartment." The viewer can see that, indeed, Paul and Rashid have met in the apartment and have developed a relationship that can transcend the cultural race boundaries; the black/white dichotomy is revealed to be a social construct. Still, Rashid counters, "Let's not get too idealistic," calling us on our simplistic belief that these binaries can be deconstructed so easily. This area is doubly grey, so it should be no surprise that the scene immediately following this conversation is the only one in which we see Rashid smoke a cigar. He and Paul share a ritual and decadent "smoke," immersed in the extreme indeterminacy, the grey "other virtues," of their relationship to each other and to the boundaries that enclose them.

It takes some time for these two to reach such a level of comfort with this indeterminacy, however. When Rashid first comes to Paul's apartment, the two men have to deal with the conflicts of living in the same space. Black and white are still clearly delineated, and neither is comfortable allowing its edge to blur into the other. The way Paul initially reacts to this discomfort is to ask Rashid to leave; despite his kindness, Paul is reluctant to relinquish his territory. Because neither man has yet realized that indeterminacy is an option, the language employed here is clichéd and rigid. In the course of one very short conversation, Rashid and Paul employ such phrases as "you've been very kind," "all good things must come to an end," "no hard feelings," "the coast is clear," "the world is my oyster," "take care of yourself," and "make sure the light is green before you cross the street." Such rigid language calls attention to itself, begs to be noticed; it does not encourage the sort of fluid and languid enjoyment of that which we cannot express.

Likewise, Auggie must grow into his comfort with indeterminacy. A former girlfriend, Ruby (Stockard Channing), comes into Auggie's store one day, asking him for help. She claims that Auggie is the father of her 18-year-old daughter who has run away from home, is addicted to crack, and is four months pregnant. She admits to Auggie that she is overwhelmed, and she appeals to his sense of attachment to their grandchild. This, understandably, takes Auggie by surprise. He hasn't seen Ruby in almost 19 years, and he hasn't forgiven her for marrying another man. He is overwhelmed both by her reappearance and by the information that he might have a daughter (let alone a grandchild), and the language he uses to respond to Ruby reflects his inability to deal with such enormous emotional issues: he uses such clichés as "true to myself," "I'm all ears," "lady of my dreams," and "for old time's sake"; and he adopts a sarcastic tone, full of false bravado, saying, "All my spare cash is tied up in a business venture, and I haven't collected on my profits yet. Too bad you caught me at the wrong time." Language must fail him in the face of such surprising news, but he forces it upon the situation anyway. He applies uncompromising constructs of language to an emotional issue that he cannot contain.

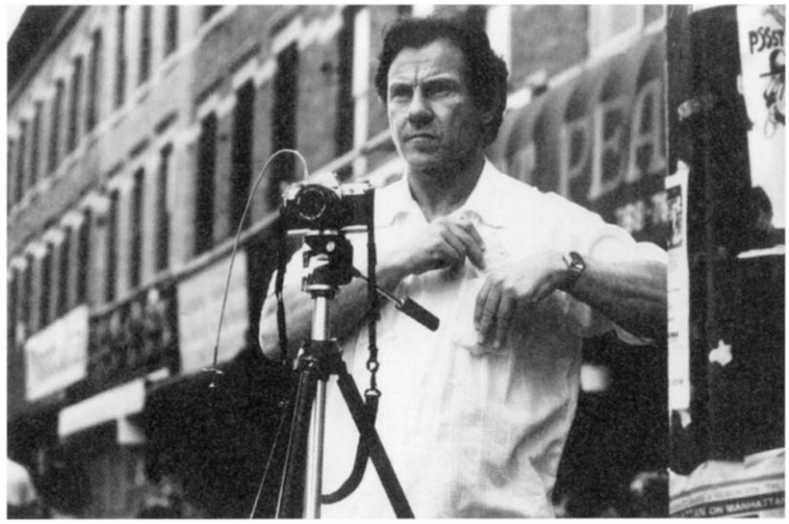
Later, however, after Auggie accompanies Ruby on a visit to their daughter (the emotional nadir of the film), he surrenders himself to the inadequacy of language. He explains to one of his employees, "You never know what's gonna happen next, and the mo-



Father and son:
Harold Perrineau, Jr.,
and Forest Whitaker

ment you think you do you don't know a goddamn thing. This is what we call a paradox." The employee indicates that he understands Auggie by saying, "You don't know nothin', it's like paradise. I know what that is. That's after you're dead and you go up to heaven and you sit with the angels." Shortly after this exchange, Auggie decides to give Ruby the money that will help her put her daughter in rehab, even though he knows that "mathematically speaking . . . it's only about a 50:50 chance" that he is the father. Ruby tells him, "It's your call, Auggie." She is touched by Auggie's gift and calls him an angel from heaven. Considering the earlier conversation about paradise necessitating ignorance, Auggie truly has become an angel. He finally understands Ruby's desperation, and, knowing that there is no guarantee either of his paternity or of Ruby's using the money the way she claims she will, he hands her the money, smiles, and walks away. Language will fail him again if he tries to use it, so he revels in the indeterminacy. He smokes a cigarette and happily lets the grey mist swirl around him.

If language is inherently inadequate, so too are the names of the characters here. Rashid, in particular, demonstrates the slipperiness of naming; he illustrates the inability of any name to adequately represent the truth. When he first meets Paul, he introduces himself as Rashid Cole. Since Paul is white and he is black, the name Rashid fittingly reflects the ethnic differences between the two men. Later, however, when his aunt is looking for him (Rashid has lived with her since his mother died and his father abandoned him twelve years ago), we find out that Rashid's real name is Thomas Jefferson Cole. This name highlights the paradox he and his family experience; it reflects their acceptance of the American Dream, since his namesake is a powerful white man, but they live in the projects in relative poverty. Still later, when Rashid wants to conceal his identity from the biological father he has finally located, he adopts Paul's name and identity. He becomes Paul Benjamin in order to avoid confronting his past. Late in the film, however, Paul and Auggie force Rashid to identify himself to his father. They arrive unexpectedly at the gas station Cyrus Cole (Forest Whitaker) owns and at which Rashid has been working under his assumed name. Rashid tries to keep Cyrus from approaching what Cyrus assumes are two potential customers, but Paul and Auggie welcome an introduction to the man they know to be Rashid's father. When the "real" Paul introduces himself, then, Cyrus remarks on the glaring coincidence of the name. Rashid first attempts to dismiss the question, saying "You and junior got the same name, too, don't you?" Cyrus replies, "Well, yea, but he's my son. I mean, he's my flesh and blood. You got the same name as this man here, and you ain't even the same color as him." Rashid launches into a description of a fictitious Same Name Club as a means to explain the situation, but Auggie and Paul don't let him get away with the name-slippage any longer. They needle Rashid: "Come on. Your real name. The name that's on your birth certificate. . . . The whole name. The first name and last name." They sense that revealing his real name will anchor Rashid and those around him in his true identity. Cyrus, at first, doesn't understand where this is going. He says, "Paul. Rashid. Thomas. Whatever. Which one is it?" Finally, Rashid reveals his full name, looking his father directly in the eye and anticipating the rejection he's so afraid of. The irony here, however, is that Rashid confesses his name while wearing a workshirt that bears



"It's my corner":
Harvey Keitel as Auggie Wren

his father's name, "Cyrus." In this scene, then, all the names Rashid has been given and has given himself converge, as he simultaneously reveals his true identity and assumes the costume and identity of his father. These two identities both complement and contradict one another, creating a gap between sign and signifier, leaving Rashid's name and identity unresolved.

Personal identity itself, in fact, is revealed to be a construct, a representation that depends on the viewer for interpretation. When Paul finds out that Auggie is an amateur photographer, for example, he says, "So you're not just some guy who pushes coins across the counter?" Auggie replies, "Well, that's what people see, but that ain't necessarily what I am." He does not assert another identity to replace the one Paul describes, he merely appreciates the gap between what appears so and what is so. Auggie is the one character who instinctively understands that what we see is not as important as what we do not.

The photographs Auggie takes are a powerful example of this aesthetic stance. He variously calls his photography his life's work, his hobby, and his project, but Auggie is the essential postmodern artist. Every morning at 8 a.m. he stands kitty-corner from his store and snaps a picture. The angle of the camera never varies; the vagaries of chance (the weather, the seasons, the day of the week, the changing fashions, and the like) determine the composition of his photograph and comprise his "art." When he shows his collection of photographs to Paul, he proudly explains that he has 4,000 pictures of the same place, but that each picture is different. "It's my corner, after all. I mean, it's just one little part of the world, but things take place there, too, just like everywhere else. It's a record of my little spot." Paul is overwhelmed by the numbers of photographs, so Auggie advises him, "You'll never get it if you don't slow down, my friend." Understanding his art can only come with the understanding that the photographs capture fleeting moments. They show

> sometimes the same people, sometimes different ones. Sometimes the different ones become the same, and the same ones disappear. . . . The earth revolves around the sun, and every day the light from the sun hits the earth at a different angle.

Auggie knows that art, and indeed all forms of representation, can only capture a fleck of the truth, but he tries to counter this failure by collecting the fragments and encouraging the viewer to see what is not there.

Auggie presents these fragments in a photo album; he mounts the black-and-white photographs on black paper and labels each picture with the time and date it was taken. As Paul flips through the album, then, we see each page framed by our own viewing screen. There are four photos to a page, each with the recognizable background of Auggie's cigar shop, but each with different action in the foreground. The fact that the people, animals, and objects in the photographs are in motion and are obviously not even aware they are being captured on film highlights the constructedness of Auggie's art. It is not polished, it is often asymmetrical and awkward, but it calls attention to the fact that his frame is imposed and that life is going on outside the boundaries of what we can see.

The entire film, likewise, is presented as a collection of photographs. Although the locations of the scenes do change, they are relatively few: Auggie's

store, Paul's apartment, and Cyrus's garage are the primary backdrops. Within these recurring locales, the mise-en-scènes are constructed so that our view is endearingly awkward and partially obstructed. Characters stand at the edges of the screen, affording us clear views of the unimportant, inanimate objects between them; large parts of characters' bodies are often cut completely out of the frame, leaving in a knee or a hand of the person sitting next to the character who's talking; foregrounds contain corners of tables, backs of chairs, and stacks of books, forcing us to look past them and impose our own deep focus; people move in and out of the frame while the characters we're watching remain stationary. Even these slight violations of convention call attention to themselves and ask us to remember that we're not seeing the whole picture, that what we do not see may be more interesting and more important than what we do.

Like Auggie's photo album, too, this film is "mounted" on black "pages." It begins with a black screen, and it returns to black screens seven more times before the film ends. Each time, we are given an identifying label to guide our interpretation of the pictures that are mounted on that "page." Just as Auggie's time/date labels don't reveal anything particular about the photographs they accompany, these film labels seem oddly placed. One locates us in time ("Summer 1990") and one identifies the title of the film, but the others simply give a list of the characters' names ("1. Paul"; "2. Rashid"; "3. Ruby"; "4. Cyrus"; "5. Auggie"). Each sequence does contain some revelation about the character whose name it bears, but it often does so via the independent and unrelated action and dialogue of the other characters. The connection between these labels and the meaning of the scenes that surround them is ultimately indeterminate, but the connection is made in an indirect, intangible way.

Although these similarities to Auggie's art are intriguing, the film further extends the notion of indeterminacy in a number of ways. It operates in the real time of the viewer, for instance, and is therefore edited in a way that Auggie's photographs need not be. The editing choices made for this film, then, often exclude the viewer from information that the characters have presumably discussed. While extensive use of this technique would render the film unintelligible, its use here serves to reinforce the sense that we are not seeing the whole story. We are made aware of the limits of the film's frame.

Further, Auggie's photographs are solely a visual medium, while the film is accompanied by sound. Again, the use of sound here makes us aware that life is being lived outside the limits of our vision, as we often hear sirens, music, and engine noise from passing cars, and voices from behind doors and around corners. During the black screens, as well, multiple sounds often dissolve into one another before finally becoming the sound that will match the expectations set by the visual image. In the opening sequence, for example, the black screen is accompanied by undifferentiated street noise, which dissolves into a drum rhythm, which dissolves into the sounds of a train, which dissolves into a radio broadcast of a baseball game. Eventually, the radio broadcast is accompanied by the banter of Auggie's customers, whom we see when we're presented with our first visual image. This asynchronous sound, then, decenters us just enough to make us aware that we're viewing a representation that wrestles with, but cannot contain, chaos.

This formal acknowledgment that the film will both attempt to represent and fail to represent celebrates the sort of artistic indeterminacy Paul relates in a story about Bakhtin. He tells Rashid about the siege of Leningrad and the slaughter of 500,000 people. "And there's Bakhtin," he says, "holed up in an apartment, expecting to be killed any day. He has plenty of tobacco, but no paper to roll it in; so he takes the pages of a manuscript he's been working on for ten years, and he tears them up to roll cigarettes." Rashid expresses his disbelief, claiming that no true artist would destroy his work like that. Paul, though, thinks it makes perfect sense: "I mean, if you think you're gonna die, what's more important: a good book or a good smoke? So he huffed and he puffed, and little by little he smoked his book." Bakhtin's novel, in its written form, was an attempt to contain chaos, and, in its cigarette form, an acknowledgment and a celebration of the fact that such attempts are ultimately inconclusive.

This reference to Bakhtin, too, is an apt one, as he claimed that the qualities of a good novel have influenced other artistic genres: "The novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)."[3] In its celebration of the indeterminacy of language, identity and artistic representation, *Smoke* attempts to create an unfinished and open-ended text. Further, it asks us to notice and appreciate the "joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority . . . all (hierarchical) position,"[4] and, indeed, all artistic endeavor.

The end of the film most explicitly addresses this relativity and constructedness of art. By the time

Rashid has been reunited with his father, Auggie has given Ruby the money to help their daughter, and Paul has overcome his writer's block, it is December. Paul goes into the cigar shop, as usual, and talks to Auggie about a story he has just agreed to write for the *New York Times*. It must be a Christmas Story, and it must be finished quite soon, so Paul is beginning to worry about getting it written. Auggie offers to tell him a good Christmas story he knows (as long as Paul buys him lunch), and he swears that every word of it is true.

The story Auggie tells is poignant and beautiful: it starts in a summer, years ago, when he first started working at the cigar shop. A young man was stealing some magazines, so Auggie chased him down the street until he didn't want to run anymore. Auggie noticed that the man had dropped his wallet; he picked it up, looked through the photographs of the young man and his family, and kept it in his apartment. He thought of the man occasionally, but it wasn't until Christmas that he decided to return the wallet to the address on the man's driver's license. When he got to the right apartment in the projects, the only tenant there was the blind grandmother of the man whose wallet Auggie had come to return. The woman, though, initially assumed that Auggie was her grandson; Auggie played along with the mistaken identity, and the woman chose to ignore her eventual realization that Auggie really was an imposter. The two spent Christmas together, since they both would be alone otherwise, pretending to be family ("It was as if we both decided to play this game without having to discuss the rules"). The woman eventually fell asleep, and Auggie did the dishes; before he left the apartment, though, he went to the bathroom, where he discovered a stack of stolen cameras. Impulsively, Auggie put one of the cameras in his pocket and left the apartment. The camera that he stole that day, of course, was the camera he used every morning since.

When Auggie finishes telling his story, Paul compliments him: "That was a good deed, Auggie. That was a nice thing you did for her." Auggie laughs, and replies, "I lied to her. I stole from her. I don't see how you could call that a good deed"; but we get the feeling that he agrees with Paul. There is a brief silence, and then Paul says, "Bullshit is a real talent, Auggie. To make up a good story you have to know how to push all the right buttons. I'd say you were up there among the masters." Auggie never reasserts that his story is true, but he doesn't deny that it's bullshit either. Faced with the beauty of the story, the indeterminacy of the truth, and their appreciation for each other, the two men revert to uncomfortable clichés: Auggie says, "If you can't share your secrets with your friends, what kind of friend are you?"; and Paul replies, "Exactly. Life just wouldn't be worth living, would it?" Thankfully, they quit talking at that point. They quietly acknowledge that language cannot capture the emotion of the moment, and they gaze at each other, blowing gentle, wispy smoke-kisses across the table.

Perhaps Auggie lived, remembered, and retold this story; perhaps he merely invented the story to help Paul with his deadline. His motive is not important either to Paul or to us. What Auggie's story really reveals is that every story's connection to an ultimate truth can be called into question. Having just watched the telling of a story (the camera here does its only extreme close-ups of the film: one on Auggie's mouth and the other on Paul's eyes as the story reaches its conclusion), we next see the writing of it (via a close-up of a typewriter pounding out the title page of Paul's submission to the *Times*), and we finally watch as a beautiful black-and-white sequence of film images translates the story we've just heard. This sequence is accompanied by a musical sound track ("You're Innocent When You Dream") and does not allow us to hear the dialogue between characters; the only diegetic sound we hear, in fact, is the closing of the door as Auggie leaves the apartment and the screen fades to black. The elements of artistic representation have been laid bare before us (the imagining, the telling, the writing, the transfer to visual and aural media) and have reminded us that the film we have just been watching underwent a similar process.

One could argue, in fact, that "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" is merely Auggie's rendering of the same elements that Wayne Wang and Paul Auster wrestled with in the preceding film sequence. Both begin in the cigar shop; both operate within a summer-to-Christmas time frame; both attempt to address issues of identity, conscience, and the social constructs that insist on such binary oppositions as black and white, or right and wrong. Each filmic treatment of these issues foregrounds certain formal techniques and certain elements of plot and content. There is poignancy and beauty in each "film," but it is the way that they complement one another that intimates a more haunting Truth.

Unfortunately (and this is a particularly disappointing flaw in a film that does so many things so well), the indeterminacy and beauty that this film celebrates is solely reserved for men. The male characters enjoy their cigars and relish the ethereal and intangible, but, as in an all-male smoker, women are

excluded from this decadent ritual. Ruby and her daughter both smoke cigarettes, but they do so nervously; they do not enjoy their contact with the unknown in the same ways the men do.

The women are also limited in this film by their rigidly feminine names: "Ruby" is an expensive, fiery red gem; "April" (a bookstore clerk who accepts a date with both Rashid and Paul) is a gently fertile month, and certainly not sexually aggressive; "Violet" is a petite flower, but she makes up for that with her surnames—"Sanchez de Jalapeno" ("the hottest chili pepper this side of the Rio Grande," according to Auggie). These names are clichés at best; they are offensively exoticized and one-dimensional in a less gracious reading. Felicity (Ashley Judd), Ruby's daughter, is the only female character for whom a name is afforded any play, but because her appearance in the film is brief, because she is a runaway and a crack addict, because she has just had an abortion, and because she lives in a dark, filthy apartment, there is no real ambiguity in her name. "Felicity" in this film resists direct translation into "happiness," but it so clearly means "despair" that she might as well have been named Dolores. For a film that so beautifully challenges the constructs of language, the rigid application of naming here is upsetting and disappointing.

Other misrepresentations of women, however, bypass disappointing and approach shocking. If the image of motherhood that Ruby presents is problematic, for example, other characters reveal motherhood to be fatal to the mother, the child, or both: Rashid's mother was killed when he was young; Felicity has an abortion; and Paul's wife was killed when she was five months pregnant. Cyrus's second wife, it must be said, has a son and seems to enjoy her role in the family, but we never know her name and she rarely speaks. That all the female characters (with the exception of April and Violet, minor characters who are merely ornaments for the men they accompany for the single scene they appear in) are necessarily mother figures is also problematic; not only does that pigeonhole women, it also destines them (considering the precedent set for motherhood in this film) to unhealthy, even fatal, relationships with their children and with one another.

Most disturbing of all is the presentation of the female lack of sight. Ruby wears a patch over her left eye, for example. Auggie comments that she looks like a pirate and asks her about the "blue marble" she used to have in that eye socket. Ruby doesn't want to explain the details about how she lost her prosthetic eye, but she dismisses its worth by saying, "The thing was cursed. It never gave me nothing but grief." Further, the grandmother in Auggie's story is completely blind. Granted, her other senses allow her to perceive in other ways, but she, like Ruby, cannot see in the same way the men can. In a film that addresses representation, the fact that the two primary female characters are denied the power of observation seems particularly disturbing. They cannot see, therefore they cannot re-present; they must merely be the passive subjects of a man's representation.

Herein lies the danger for women in a postmodern aesthetic. The dismantling of that which is certain can lead to a celebration of that which is hazy and inconclusive; but this dismantling is often done only by the men who are privileged by the very structures they challenge. (Consider, here, the fact that postmodern theorists use language to deconstruct the structures language creates.) The beautiful closing sequence of *Smoke* revels in its ambiguity (what Auggie does is neither right nor wrong, neither truth nor "bullshit"), but it does so while relying quite heavily on the other dichotomies of male and female, active and passive. As a result, the smoke in which this film indulges is as ethereal as "the soul," and can be celebrated as such; it also, however, retains the insidiously carcinogenic properties that Wang and Auster have chosen to deemphasize.

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Notes

1. Lynn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," in *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994), p. 658.
2. Ibid., p. 654.
3. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, rev. ed., ed. Hazard Adams (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992), p. 840.
4. Ardis L. Nelson, "Holy *Smoke*: Anatomy of a Vice," *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma*, vol. 61, no. 4 (1987), p. 590.

Secrets and Lies & Career Girls

(For both films) Writer/Director: Mike Leigh. Producer: Simon Channing-Williams. Cinematographer: Dick Pope. October Films.

The family is a sounding board for identity, and never more so than in the films of Mike Leigh. His two most recent films are about the restoration of an orphan and the creation of an ersatz family at college followed by a check-up on the health of those friendships some years later. Leigh's portraits of the tyranny of our near-and-dear leave no doubt why the Mafia is called "the family." His dry-eyed realism is psychologically astute, while his ironic narratives are not dramas but episodes from the emotional tug-of-war between parent and child. He can capture the internal conflict of escaping from unheroic childhood into unheroic maturity, as well as the direct tension with one's parents and origins.

Of his earlier films, *High Hopes* (1988) shows working-class characters escaping narrow lives only to be trapped on the ladder of upward mobility. *Life Is Sweet* (1990) proves it's not: a hopeless dreamer of a father and a sex-kitten of a mother are too self-involved to realize their two daughters are stranded in adolescence with no role models for growing up. *Naked* (1992) contributes to Leigh's tales of terminal illusions by dropping the hapless comedy for a study of sadistic abuse—social, sexual, psychological, and self (commonly called masochism)—in the character of Johnny, who has no family, no context, no past, no future. For all the melodrama and trauma visited by family, *Naked* is what happens without family.

With each film, Leigh's vision has become sharper, building to the highly original, resonant *Secrets and Lies* (1996), a film about the quest for a mother which turns into an odyssey—in the sense of self-discovery and homecoming—for the entire family. We are introduced to a young black optometrist named Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), whose adoptive mother has died and left her orphaned. Intelligent, sensitive, and successful, Hortense Cumberbatch soon discovers the family that would have been hers, had she remained Elizabeth Purley, the daughter of Cynthia Purley (Brenda Blethyn), a manic-depressive alcoholic with a grating habit of calling everybody "Sweetheart." Such parentage is part of Leigh's ironic inversion of the Dickensian literary theme of the orphan reclaiming his birthright: the Purleys constitute the definitive white-trash family in working-class England.

After introducing Hortense, the film then abandons her for the vulgar but comical dysfunctions of the family Cynthia can't hold together. Cynthia's well-intentioned whining has alienated her daughter Roxanne (Claire Rushbrook), a 20-year-old street sweeper whose dyspepsia is accentuated in her eye-makeup. Roxanne has a shiftless beau, and they grope each other at every opportunity, which she flaunts before her mother's mewling frustration.

Cynthia's brother Maurice (Timothy Spall) is a portrait and family photographer and makes a good living for his middle-class-and-still-climbing wife, Monica (Phyllis Logan). Maurice knows that his sister once gave up a baby, but that knowledge has been superceded by his tiresome wife's yearning for a baby of her own. Maurice is a model of upright resignation. His stolid persistence is both a lesson in success and comic relief. Leigh manipulates the footage to illustrate how hard Maurice works to capture the frozen moment of the happy couple, family, child, even animal. Stop-motion editing, the dreamy lighting of a studio, the flash of a bulb are all Maurice's tools in helping people find an image worth framing and claiming as their identity. There is a faintly autobiographical tinge to Leigh's lessons about human vanity and the artifice of images in Maurice's patience with human nature, waiting for his photographic subjects to achieve that moment worth preserving. It also has the reflexive function of hinting at Leigh's own improvisational process in finding what works.

There's little in Cynthia's or Roxanne's lives worth saving. In Cynthia's house is a room ajumble with her deceased father's effects. When she summons Maurice to discuss the crisis set in motion by Hortense's phone call, they both end up in this room, awkwardly embracing in a clumsy attempt at reassurance and comfort. Her brother advises her to clean out all this useless stuff: it's as if she'd kept the bathwater, not the baby. Disposing of trash is how Roxanne earns a living, yet she fails to apply this talent at home with Cynthia.

As the nexus of the two themes of preservation and vision, Hortense is in the business of saving people's sight, and Maurice is equally successful at reinforcing a particular vision of self in his customers. Tacking this theme to the formal structure of his film, Leigh incorporates a moment in the *en face* camera style of Cinema Direct to drive home his message.

Secrets and Lies: (left) family ties; (right) Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste, left) and Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn)

Maurice stands before his family and wails into the camera (at us), "Secrets and lies, secrets and lies," admonishes tolerance, then pleads, "Just get along." (Disrupting the flow of narrative fiction, this scene strikes a false note within the style set up by Leigh and cinematographer Dick Pope.)

A "predisposition to disposal" is the social and psychological issue of the film—the balance on which we weigh each of the characters. In a scene that rounds out the pleasantly plump Maurice, he meets his old partner, who once rejected Maurice and studio photography as too middlebrow. The man is now broken from globe-trotting and wants back the business that Maurice has meanwhile built into a substantial enterprise. *Secrets and Lies* not only cautions us to "sort out our lives," but also to be careful what we throw away, because we might come back to it or it to us.

Cynthia's own no-deposit/no-return life presents a variety of problems, although no single bad habit can be linked to having given up her child for adoption. In fact, she seems to have repressed it perfectly until Hortense arranges to see her and insists upon the relationship, brandishing proof in the form of legal papers. Leigh turns the recognition scene into one of cinema's finest moments. The setting is a long, narrow, portentously empty café that recalls the sterility of scenes in Antonioni's films, which extend the horizon yet promise nothing. In a long, unbroken take, the two women sit over tea, silently side by side. From the play of hope and anxiety on their faces, we know they're on an emotional roller coaster. Hortense explains, Cynthia resists, then a trick of memory allows her character to catch up with a narrative that has put us far ahead of her. Her bright smile lights up the dark café as her memory spans the void: this black woman is her child and wants her mum. Cynthia's sly, shameful delight in the recall of sublime error reveals that very deep human need for prevarication. Still, mother and daughter sit there like truth and consequences, cheek-by-jowl, as it all "comes back" to Cynthia.

Cynthia reaches out to claim Hortense, and the film suddenly careens into direct conflict when Cynthia invites Hortense to Roxanne's twenty-first birthday party chez Maurice and Monica. At first, Cynthia introduces Hortense as her co-worker from the box factory, which the others know just doesn't compute: Hortense is too "well-bred." Assumptions, if not prejudices, about race ricochet around on their faces in a drama of reaction shots. We see it coming and expect the set-up to yield to the inevitable racial tension in a ponderous "guess who's coming to celebrate your birthday" showdown. But the race card is not played; it is eclipsed by an explosion of sibling rivalry. Roxanne throws a tantrum that her unknown sister has upstaged her birthday. Monica lets her pride in her well-appointed home dissolve in hysteria over her own barren state when she hears of Cynthia's actually giving away something Monica desires so badly. Ironically, the perceived threat, Hortense, becomes the centrifugal force to pull them back together. Leigh's final scene has Hortense and Roxanne visiting together in Cynthia's sterile little backyard. It's awkward, tentative, and makes us want to stick around and watch these unlikely sisters under the skin.

Career Girls: Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge, left) and Annie (Lynda Steadman) as students; Ricky (Mark Benton), with Annie and Hannah

The sisterly bonding of an unlikely attachment becomes the starting point for Leigh's next film, *Career Girls* (1997), about two women who get together in London for a weekend to renew their college camaraderie. The story is overtly a measure of similarities and differences—between the women and between stages of maturity—as seen in the present and remembered in flashback a decade after leaving college. Annie (Lynda Steadman) is the shy, quiet one; Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge) the outrageous extrovert. The film privileges Annie's point of view, as she develops from the walking-wounded to a more resilient and level person through the various escapades of smoking, drinking, sexual experimentation, and hellbent Hannah. In London, in the present, the girls' new consciousness and economic power is on display as Hannah looks for a flat to purchase, a sure sign of creeping conservatism. The point of the story: our college consciousness may be highly idiosyncratic, individualistic, and quirky, but maturity smooths the edges and renders us bourgeois consumers of real estate.

The characters first meet when Annie arrives to be interviewed by Hannah and her roommate for the unenviable position of flatmate. Hannah is prickly, Annie is a mass of nerves. Hannah smokes, Annie coughs. Hannah is sexually voracious; Annie is virginal. Annie is both afraid of Hannah and devoted to her; Hannah is annoyed by Annie but learns to be gentle with her. The characters suffer from binary opposition, but the friendship thrives on eccentricity, while tolerating each other has the long term effect of tempering both personalities. Among the college girls' equally insecure and bizarre friends are Adrian (Joe Tucker), a stoned Lothario who seduces them both, and Ricky (Mark Benton), a misshapen boy with a speech impediment which, in retrospect, was a symptom of a deeper disorder. Dualism reigns again among the male dramatis personae, with the former incapable of love and the latter hopelessly in love with Annie. Too fortuitously for comfort, both Adrian and Ricky reappear during the weekend reunion.

Adrian, sunk to the state of a slippery real estate broker, doesn't recognize the girls as he tries to peddle property. Ricky, sitting on the stoop where they all once shared a flat and hugging a stuffed animal, leads us out of Leigh's customary realism and into unaccustomed surreal territory. Deranged and babbling, Ricky only half-recognizes the girls and no longer belongs to this world. This is less of a mystery if we incorporate into its "accidental" quality the invisible feeling the girls have when their one-time roommate fails to recognize them as she jogs past, giving their entire meeting a dream-like quality. Times change; old friends become strange; all that endures is the bond between Hannah and Annie, clearly a necessary element in the apparently lonely lives of two students become "career girls."

In the process of maturation, the role of memory is to isolate that which distinguished our youth, things both uniquely embarrassing and giddily grandiose. The performances go overboard to emphasize the girls' immaturity. Annie scratches at a dire case of eczema on her face, jerking her head to the side all the time in anxiety over her marred appearance. Hannah's

entire body twitches like a puppet on a string as she incessantly pokes the air with her bony finger. Their mannerisms are so distracting that they recall Pauline Kael's cruel capsule of Sandy Dennis "turning post-nasal drip into a school of acting."

One can't help but compare the minimal strokes used by a director like Eric Rohmer to depict the insecurity of youth. The overkill with which the actors attack their roles in *Career Girls* is a kind of "thespianism"—acting for its own sake—that is probably the greatest risk of the process that has made Leigh famous. It would seem that *Career Girls* never got beyond the birth of the characters. Apart from the formal considerations of watching Leigh work with flashbacks and uncomfortably engineered coincidences, the film does not benefit from his customary social realism; it's all psychological and not too realistic. Its disappointment is rather like going to the wrong class reunion.

Leigh's by now legendary method of working with his cast to develop the characters before setting it all down in script form lends a certain mystique to the actors' thorough immersion in their roles. Leigh's process can yield compelling results, but it can also be a trap. Behavior itself can become the subject of the film, leaving story and style in the dust as we marvel at the verisimilitude with which an actor inhabits the role. Thespianism is good if you like to watch actors, but acting is only one aspect of the medium, and the primacy of acting over plot, character, and style can become tiresome.

Let it not be said that success spoiled Mike Leigh; he was in postproduction on *Career Girls* at the time *Secrets and Lies* premiered at Cannes in 1996. This review is not meant as an alert that Leigh has lost his touch, but rather as an exploration of why his obsession with the tension between family and self-realization can work so well in *Secrets and Lies* yet fizzle into mannerism in *Career Girls*. If *Secrets and Lies* is Mike Leigh's best film, it is not only for the acting; if *Career Girls* is his worst, it's because it's only about acting.

The concommitant emphasis on character over plot is a phenomenon that Paul Giles[1] traces back to Leigh's early work in television. He attributes Leigh's interest in subtle personality changes over action to the very fabric of television series, which are derived from groups of scenes rather than the high-concept arc of plot delivered by mainstream movies. In Leigh's works for the theater—character studies full of eccentric working-class types which similarly revolve around nuances and small gestures— the same lack of closure extends the world of the characters into our imagination. It is arguably a mark of the politically engaged modernist more than of the TV-trained auteur to resist climax and tidy endings.

What is it about *Secrets and Lies* that makes its narrow world so much deeper than the world of aspirations depicted in *Career Girls*? Perhaps because a search through the past reasserts family ties, as the orphan is restored to her rightful place, throwing the social and class relationships as well as the nuclear family into relief. *Career Girls*, on the other hand, is about reuniting two women whose history dwarfs their current relationship and who seem oddly isolated in the worlds of their past and present. What can be said of both films is that Leigh forces his characters together as a means of searching for the glue that makes people want to be together.

But the two films vary widely in their resonance and complexity of character. *Career Girls* is blinded by inspecting in the rearview mirror two college girls' insecure mannerisms. It remains slight because the two women's shared past, despite youthful crises of loyalty and betrayal, is merely the foundation of conformity for more stylish, lonelier women—fussy consumers of real estate, like all other grown-ups. We are left with the feeling that they have lost more than they gained, which is exactly the opposite effect of its predecessor.

In *Secrets and Lies* the search for the natural mother is full of surprises, outrages. In the end, everybody has gained something—whether they like it or not. And the film leaves us wanting to see how Cynthia's two daughters, newly introduced, will work out their oppositional, raw sisterhood. The title, *Secrets and Lies*, sets us up to distrust its outcome, especially as we get to know Cynthia, upon whom maternity was thrust with little success. In some deeply metaphorical sense, Hortense has gone slumming among an underclass to which black people were once consigned. We can't help but suspect that, however wacky and winning the entertainment value of Cynthia's awakening may be, her failure to become Hortense's mother has accrued to Hortense's advantage.

The quest for parentage, hearth, and identity is not surprising at the end of a century that began by telling us biology is destiny, then allowed technology and social-political experiment to disprove it. In a conversation with Mike Leigh, I asked him about the orphan theme so prevalent in films last year.[2] He described his own interest in a change in English law in 1975, giving orphans in the U.K. legal access to their records to trace their parents (parental consent to such

a meeting being the inevitable buried treasure or barrier reef). When I pressed him about the significance of so many films on the subject, he batted the question back at me.

Rising to the fully pretentious height that film criticism permits its practitioners, I opined, "Our obsession with orphans is a displaced anxiety about the very real loss of family that people feel everywhere. The search for roots has become a twentieth-century cliché, and as we move into the twenty-first century, we're fairly desperate to know where we came from. We're also afraid, as your film shows, that we just may find what we're not looking for—a background that we feel is beneath us. What if we're not the true heirs to the kingdom?"

"Thanks," said Mike. "I'll use that, if you don't mind." This exchange between director and critic mirrored the process he employs to create characters and stories, and I could see how one is drawn out and then into Leigh's purpose, and of course, I was flattered. Then he added, definitively, so as to have the final word: "It's also about the need to discover who we are or what we are—the who and the what not necessarily being the same thing, of course. It's a metaphor for another kind of search into one's own being—and becoming."

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Notes

1. "History with Holes," in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 79.
2. Films about orphans in 1996 included Bertolucci's *Stealing Beauty*, David Russell's *Flirting with Disaster*, Argentinian Alejandro Agresti's *Buenos Aires-Vice Versa*, about a generation of orphans after the "disappearances," and even the Whoopi Goldberg vehicle *Bogus*.

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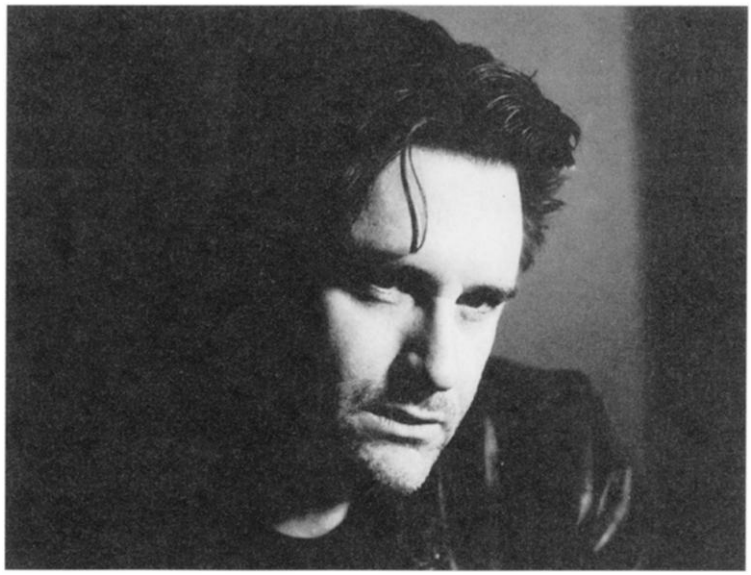

Bill Pullman
as Fred Madison
in *Lost Highway*

Lost Highway

Director: David Lynch. Producers: Deepak Nayar, Tom Sternberg, Mary Sweeney. Cinematographer: Peter Deming. Editor: Mary Sweeney. Music: Angelo Badalamenti. October Films.

The ever quotable pop artist and underground filmmaker Andy Warhol reportedly stated that films are "better talked about than seen." With his latest film adventure, *Lost Highway*, David Lynch has given audiences a complex and perplexing story to ponder and some astonishingly brilliant images to enjoy. Yet the majority of critical responses to Lynch's new horror noir have denounced the film's narrative as being interesting but impenetrably chaotic at best, and some have even gone as far as to call the film unwatchable. Even the cinephiles who have recognized the significant aesthetic achievements of Lynch's film have announced that he is unconcerned with narrative logic in *Lost Highway*. Perhaps part of this critical response is due to a reluctance to embrace the robust eroticism and taste for violence displayed in Lynch's works. Lynch has ventured beyond linear film narratives and left incredulous critics and puzzled onlookers muttering that either his picture is obscure by accident or that he is engaged in some frivolous form of cinematic gamesmanship. Some reviewers have expressed their opinions in a tone of righteous indignation and used the supposed "mess" of this film to exact some type of petty revenge upon those who acclaimed Lynch upon the triumph of *Blue Velvet*.

Lost Highway may be destined to baffle devotees of traditional narrative forms in cinema, but should filmgoers be discharged from recognizing the structure and formal mastery of Lynch's film? Although many have suggested that Lynch has gone too far in yielding free reign to his eccentric set of visual obsessions, the film is contained within a formally rigorous and well-defined thematic structure. The difficulties with *Lost Highway* lie with the movie's unremitting dream-like images and Lynch's uncompromising determination to sustain an eternal sense of mystery and wonder throughout the film. He has designed a film with an open architecture in which equally plausible interpretations of the film can be constructed, and which enables the audience to use its imagination to fill in the blanks. The strategy of posing open questions is reminiscent of Antonioni in films like *L'Avventura*. A large part of what has confounded spectators in Lynch's enterprise is how to distinguish between scenes that reflect the characters' fantasies, and those that belong to the narrative "reality." *Lost Highway* is a film that would appear to have a complete disregard for differences in ontological levels. Only a recognition that its visual language communicates a descent deeper and deeper into madness can reveal *Lost Highway*'s intricate conceptual meaning. Lynch has given notice that his film takes its structure from the circular form of the Möbius strip, and herein lies the constraint against which he weaves his thematic concerns.

Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) is living a nightmare: his mind is racked by suspicion, paranoia, and anxieties about the fidelity of his sensuous but emotionally cold wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette), a

Pullman
with Patricia Arquette
as Renee Madison

dark-haired sex kitten decked out in Betty Page-styled fetish attire. Although Fred, a darkly handsome, thirtyish alto saxman in a neo-bop jazz band, would appear on the surface to be evenly matched with his mysterious and sexually powerful wife, he is incapable of arousing in her any enthusiastic sexual response. Events quickly take a sinister bend when the Madisons begin receiving unmarked videotapes on the front steps of their ominously underdecorated modernist house. When the tapes reveal that an intruder has invaded the Madisons' home and taped them while they were asleep, the terrorized couple call for police help, which arrives in the form of a comical detective duo who find no evidence of forced entry. Unsettled by the violation of their private space, Fred falls into a twitchy, zombie-like state. A third videotape arrives and he sits down to view it. He screams out in horror when the picture reveals Fred looking into the camera's eye beside Renee's savagely bloodied corpse. Although we see nothing of the crime on screen, Fred is summarily sentenced to execution for his wife's murder, and swiftly ensconced in a cell on death row. Isolated in a primitive 19th-century-styled prison cage, Fred has no memory of what happened to Renee on the fatal night, and his mind is shattered by excruciating headaches, unrelenting insomnia, and strange hallucinations (all marvelously captured in the film's mesmerizing visual effects).

Suddenly, in *Lost Highway*'s Kafkaesque center sequence, a prison guard discovers a bewildered and bruised stranger in Fred Madison's cell. A brief investigation by prison authorities determines the identity of the stranger: Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), who lives in Van Nuys with his parents, and has absolutely no recollection of how he mysteriously materialized to replace Fred Madison in prison. Pete is enthusiastically welcomed back to normal life and his job at Arnie's auto garage. Delighted with Pete's return, Mr. Eddy (Robert Loggia), a notorious gangster prone to comically capricious outbursts of violence, provides Pete with work on his vintage luxury motor cars. When Mr. Eddy brings in his 50s model Cadillac for a routine tune-up, Pete fatally falls for Alice Wakefield (also Patricia Arquette), Mr. Eddy's seductively carnivorous platinum blonde bombshell, and they embark on a furtive and—for Pete at least—obsessive affair. When the menacing Mr. Eddy's suspicions are aroused, Alice's risky and hastily devised plan of escape takes full advantage of Pete's obsession. She manipulates him into a classic film noir plot—reminiscent of *Double Indemnity* and *Body Heat*—to rob one of Mr. Eddy's associates in the pornographic underworld. As the plot unfolds and inevitably spirals down into disaster, Pete is horrified when he discovers that the object of his desire is an unscrupulously mercenary and debauched queen of porn.

As the film progresses, Pete descends deeper into darkness and confusion. At an isolated desert cabin the lovers await the arrival of one of Alice's acquaintances who is to help them escape. But at this point the two tracks of the narrative intersect. Fred Madison reemerges from Pete, and the Mystery Man (Robert Blake)—a kind of dark angel of vengeance—urges him to kill Mr. Eddy. Flames engulf the cabin—or do they?

It should be acknowledged straightaway that *Lost Highway* is, by design, extremely resistant to reduction into a definitive narrative account; by the film's end, it is evident that Lynch has intentionally withheld

the answers to questions inevitably provoked by the narrative's elusive and elliptical plot. It is virtually impossible to reconstruct a definitive and rational account of what happens in *Lost Highway*.

According to the majority of its detractors, what happens in the film's prison sequence is that Fred is transformed (think "Metamorphosis") into Pete Dayton via some type of supernatural intervention. Throughout the second half of the film, Pete's parents and girlfriend, Sheila (Natasha Gregson Wagner), allude cryptically to the mysterious and ominous circumstances of the fateful night that something strange happened to Pete. Although Pete has no recollection of that night, we repeatedly see Pete's parents and Sheila in front of the Dayton's house under a threatening evening sky, crying out to avert some impending catastrophic event. *Lost Highway* features several visual images that give some weight to a metamorphosis thesis. After all, for the most part, the film proceeds as if the central narrative has shifted from Fred's "story" to Pete's "story." While Fred agonizes in his prison cell, images of lightning flashes and horrific distortion fill the screen with overtones of extraworldly visitation. Nevertheless, the idea that Fred is literally morphed into a man with a new identity obscures more than it clarifies the subject of *Lost Highway*.

Lynch has publicly called his film a "psychogenic fugue," a term that in this context refers to a mental state in which a person is delusional although seemingly fully aware, a state from which he emerges with no memory of his actions. It also involves losing oneself and taking on an entirely new identity. Most of what occurs during the second movement of *Lost Highway* can be best understood as an elaborate journey into the hallucinations of such a state. The early sequences of the film demonstrate that Fred's consciousness is disturbed by suspicion, paranioa, and nightmares. He also has a pronounced tendency to daydream. This is made most evident when he tells the police detectives, "I like to remember things my own way. . . . How I remembered them. Not necessarily the way they happened." Fred's tenuous grip on reality is undermined by his voluntary flights into fantasy.

Lynch provides few signals that equal degrees of reality should not be attributed to all the actions of the film. By contrast, in Buñuel's *Belle de jour* the viewer is given cues, like the jingling of bells on the sound track, to distinguish fantasy from reality. The most persuasive evidence for an interpretation of *Lost Highway* as a subjective film understood primarily as Fred's hallucination occurs during the prison sequences. During his time in jail, Fred is plagued by unrelenting insomnia. Hints of his delusional state of mind can be gleaned from the sound of seagulls on the sound track as he slumps in the prison exercise yard overwhelmed by a combination of excruciating headaches and exhaustion. Hallucinations also occur in his prison cell: Fred sees the flames of an exploding desert cabin run backwards—an image that occurs again at the end of the film when Fred "returns" to replace Pete. However, the key image that provides evidence for the hallucination thesis is a distorted close up of Fred's face shaking violently back and forth before he screams out in horror. This image occurs twice: in prison before we are introduced to Pete, and just prior to the film's conclusion. The flashes of lightning and out-of-focus visuals are all evidence that Fred's mind is spinning wildly out of control. Between the parentheses, Fred creates a parallel universe in his mind that takes on a will of its own.

The two parallel stories of *Lost Highway* are two manifestations of one essential story: a man obsessed with possessing the *wrong* woman. Although Fred and Pete are played by different actors and have distinct identities, they can be understood as representing the same self. Lynch's casting of the same actress in the roles of both Renee Madison and Alice Wakefield adds further credence to the notion that *Lost Highway* contains two mythic representations of the same couple. In Fred's tormented mind, Alice embodies his obsession with the now dead (and maybe murdered by him) Renee. (The use of one actress in twin roles recalls Buñuel's playful use of two actresses for the role of the tormenting Conchita in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, or, perhaps, Hitchcock's use of Kim Novak as one woman impersonating another in *Vertigo.*) Fred's hallucination is partly an escape into fantasy and partly a terrifying ride into a nightmare beyond his will. By envisioning Pete's story, Fred creates a new incarnation of the object of his obsession, but in the end his hallucinated encounter with a seductive and compliant temptress is no less catastrophic than his earlier attempts to control the remote and withheld body and soul of his wife.

The structure of *Lost Highway* is modeled on the form of the Möbius strip: a strip twisted 180 degrees and then looped by connecting the opposing ends. In the first image of *Lost Highway* we are speeding down the center of a desolate two-lane flattop along the dashed canary-yellow center line; we hear the industrial beat and the haunting baritone of David Bowie's "I'm Deranged" flowing over the credits on the sound

track. This image opens and closes the film. It forms a frame, provides symmetry, and evokes both the closing of a circle and a sense of the infinite (as if this dream or nightmare could go on forever). The circular structure also enables Lynch to construct a world where conventional notions of time are obliterated. In the film's first scene, a disheveled-looking Fred is at home and roused into action when he hears a voice giving an enigmatic and unnerving message over the intercom: "Dick Laurent is dead." When he goes to the window, the speaker has vanished. In the closing scene of the film it is Fred outside his own house who delivers the same message: "Dick Laurent is dead." In the end, we find out who Dick Laurent is and the two parallel stories are linked together, but many of the film's mysteries remain.

Despite the accusation that the film is chaos, or that Lynch is unconcerned with narrative logic, *Lost Highway* is contained within what Sontag terms (in *Bergman's "Persona": Styles of Radical Will* [New York: Anchor Books, 1991], p. 135) a theme-and-variation narrative. Instead of a conventional story, chronology or plot line, a theme-and-variation form of narration is nonlinear and uses the subject material as a thematic resource to develop variations on the central theme of the film: here, mirroring. The theme, which implies both duplication and opposition, manifests itself on many levels. The primary example of mirroring is captured in Arquette's characterization of two sides of the same woman: Renee (who appears passive and elusive) and Alice (who determines the action). On the superficial level of appearances, Arquette's Renee has dark hair and favors long dark silhouettes, while Arquette's Alice is a bleached blonde with a taste for revealing necklines and short skirts. However, they are the same in that each evokes a luxurious sense of carnal potency—one withheld, the other flaunted—and each wears fetishist-friendly platform high heels. The theme-and-variation narrative form enables Lynch to use devices of duplication, opposition, repetition, deviation, and inversion. Arquette's characters have opposing temperaments: Renee is quiet, removed, and cool; Alice is white-hot. The notion of duplication is explored when both Renee and Alice appear in the same photograph; of repetition when Alice and Renee repeat the same dialogue, and when the film's Mystery Man repeats dialogue in the two separate parallel stories of the movie.

Variations on the mirroring theme are worked throughout the film. Early on we see Fred fervently playing his saxophone, and later Pete listens to the same piece of music over the radio as he works on a car at Arnie's garage. However, Pete's reaction constitutes the emotional inverse of Fred's sensibility: in a fit of annoyance, as if he was subconsciously disturbed by the music's manic intensity, he shuts the radio off. Lynch also employs doubling when characters are introduced in pairs at various points of the film: the odd pair of police detectives, the two prison guards, and the two surveillance cops who follow Pete after his release from prison. Several of *Lost Highway*'s key images—like the two-lane highway, shots of long corridors, the exploding cabin shown in reverse, the frantic scene in front of the Dayton home—are also repeated, emphasizing the film's self-referential character and clear intention to pursue a theme-and-variation form of narration. Together, the complex combination of the circular structure and elliptical story line invites repeated journeys along the twisted strip of the film's narrative in search of its closely guarded secrets.

Lost Highway's greatest success is that it deftly subsumes its experiments in structure and form under the aesthetics of hallucination and the iconography of horror. The primary attraction of a Lynch film lies in his virtuosity as a visualist and his ability to conjure up moods with disturbingly visceral impact. Although *Lost Highway* starts out looking like the "real" world, it quickly becomes a "constructed" world: an extravagant phantasmagoria with twilight-zone metaphysics. The structure, form, and visuals all conspire to construct a self-contained allegorical nightmare where the sense of time is eviscerated.

The first clear indication that we are within some kind of alternate universe is the appearance of the Mystery Man. When a mysterious stranger with a mask-like face and pancake-white makeup approaches Fred during a festive party, all the background sounds magically recede away. The Mystery Man claims that he is presently at the Madisons' house and challenges Fred to call him there right now. Confused by the absurdity of the claim, Fred reluctantly dials his own number . . . to find the Mystery Man's voice answering at the other end of the line. Frightened, bewildered, and angry over yet another invasion of his private space, Fred asks for an explanation, but the Mystery Man only lets out a Vincent Price-style cackle and walks away.

The establishment of a constructed world permits Lynch and cinematographer Peter Deming to develop the film's aesthetics of hallucination. One of the film's

Patricia Arquette
as Alice Wakefield

most visually effective scenes occurs when slow-motion photography captures the electricity and longing in the initial gaze between Pete and Alice Wakefield. The mythic mood of the image derives part of its considerable emotional power from the perfect congruence between sight and sound. The slow burn of Arquette's sultry blonde bombshell is heightened by the languid sound of roaring electric guitars. Perhaps the aesthetic highpoint of *Lost Highway* is the love scene in the desert. When Pete and Alice begin their impromptu sexual encounter in the middle of a windswept desert night, their incandescent naked bodies are brightly illuminated by automobile headlights, creating a mood of intoxicating ecstasy and reverie. In the desert, the windblown golden sand and Arquette's radiant hair and torso explain Pete's total surrender to her overpowering sexual energy. The emotional mood shifts from dream to nightmare with disorienting suddenness when the headlights dissolve into darkness and the music's floating lyricism creeps into a brooding drone of synthesizers. Throughout the film, Lynch keeps the emotional tone of the movie within a dream-like register, and he changes keys between images that appear idyllic and icons of the horror genre.

Lost Highway is a decidedly dark work. In the majority of the film's interior scenes, Lynch favors murky shading and low lighting to elicit the fear of the unknown: long, dark corridors used in a variety of ways to evoke feelings of disorientation: a hallway where Fred is completely swallowed by darkness. Later in the film, Pete's walk along a corridor is accompanied by flashes of lightening and special effects that are the standard fair of the horror genre; his walk down a hallway to find the bathroom is a frightening hallucination: lightning flashes illuminate numbered doors, one of which Pete opens to find a woman, apparently Alice, taunting him. Pulsating music and red filters add to the disorienting effect. The images fittingly project Pete's turmoil in the moments just after discovering the profoundly sordid elements of Alice's life.

Lost Highway's labyrinthine construction enables Lynch to subordinate traditional cinematic concerns with dialogue and plot to a visual language that communicates moods and emotions. Although the dialogue in the film is spare, the drama of a man driven mad by his obsession with the woman he loves has an extraordinary emotional vividness. *Lost Highway* is a mystery, a fable, an allegorical nightmare. Although it can in some moments resemble our notion of reality, Lynch has basically jettisoned the tyranny of logic to take the viewer on an enigmatic journey beyond the limits of reason and reality—down some lost highway. Despite denunciations of the movie as irredeemably chaotic, it actually—with its haunting circularity and endless narrative loop—adheres to a disciplined aesthetic formality. Like *Eraserhead*, the film evokes the interior world of one man's bad dream, the mystery and confusion of a consciousness afflicted by obsession, suspicion, and passion.

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Book Reviews

This Mad Masquerade
Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age

By Gaylyn Studlar. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. $39.50 cloth; $17.50 paper.

Critical consideration of gender construction is just beginning to account for how powerful tropes of masculinity and femininity function within society and as identity. Gaylyn Studlar provides an interesting and enjoyable collection of star analyses that form a constellation of constructed masculinities. *This Mad Masquerade* is informed by her descriptions of social phenomena, which range from sideshow personnel including the "dean of freaks" and his constructed display to the possibly ambivalent gender enunciation available from social and high art dance crazes. In her introduction, Studlar declares her focus to be "Hollywood's depiction of masculinity in an era in which America felt process-driven and unsure of the meaning of rapid cultural change." Studlar follows this statement with the leading question: "If acting is putting on a figurative (and, sometimes, literal) mask, then was masculinity in the Jazz Age . . . far removed from a similar strategy in the attempt to cope with changing gender and social expectations?" Offering to answer this question, Studlar sets the reader up for a cultural history that investigates constructions of gender (particularly masculinity) vis-à-vis spectatorship (particularly female) in 1920s America by way of star analyses. Studlar stresses that she avoids "theoretical generalization" in favor of "historically specific 'spade work.'"

Studlar's approach models itself on Richard Dyer's seminal work on stardom, begun in *Stars* (1979) and continued in *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), which offered the first sustained analysis of stars as historically bound cultural texts and used a case-study approach to interrogate gender, race, and sexual orientation. Studlar takes as her focus four male actors whose period of film stardom overlaps in the 1920s: Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, Rudolph Valentino, and Lon Chaney. In the book's strongest moments, Studlar juxtaposes descriptions of social movements (for instance, Social Darwinism and the trope of de-evolution) with meta-cinematic entertainments ("freak" shows) and consideration of a star text (Lon Chaney's contortionist performances in the silent period). This structure dictates that each chapter stand alone as a self-contained essay. Studlar's central argument is that Fairbanks works hegemonically to enforce normative masculinity, while the other three stars progressively function to transgress and, with Chaney, to negate this norm. As a stand-alone essay, Chapter 1, on Fairbanks and boy culture, is particularly interesting and could be profitably assigned to undergraduate students. Unfortunately, the book lacks a sustained theoretical framework that would serve convincingly to link the chapters together.

This new book draws on Studlar's earlier work on gender difference (*In the Realm of Pleasure* [1988]; "Visual Pleasure and the Masochistic Aesthetic," *Journal of Film and Video* [1985]), female consumers ("The Perils of Pleasure?" *Wide Angle* [1991]), and stardom ("Discourses of Gender and Ethnicity," *Film Criticism* [1989]). Readers will initially assume that Studlar here continues or revises her previous scholarship, which similarly uses star texts (Dietrich, Valentino) to explore concepts of gender difference, often in terms of Gilles Deleuze's psychoanalytic-literary approach in tandem with object-relations theory, relying on nuanced concepts of masochism. However, as Studlar warns, "Anyone looking for a theoretical treatise on masculinity or the psychoanalytic use of the term masquerade in reference to gender identity will be disappointed." Rather than extending and elaborating on her own exceptional foundation, she decides to start afresh. Studlar, who laments how "overwhelming" is the "amount of material that constitutes culture at any given time," attempts to divorce her historical project from theory. This self-imposed limitation, seemingly born of her desire to be methodologically responsible and to set a higher standard for film studies, is more than a disappointment. It functions to confuse Studlar's structure and to weaken her overall project. The result, while fascinating as a description of certain aspects of a rich period in American history, would have been more fruitful if Studlar had acknowledged that theory and history can never be so easily isolated. All history also posits a theory, and all theory is written through history. Surely a cultural historian's goal must be either a theoretically informed history or an historically grounded theoretical investigation.

The title always works as the reader's first guidepost, and Studlar's, *This Mad Masquerade*, comes from an advertisement for a 1926 novel, *Women Like Men*: "This powerful novel reveals the struggle made by a woman to overcome the age-long handicap of her sex. She tries to live the codeless existence of the male in this mad masquerade." The title and its referenced origin indicate the author's interest in the theoretical concept of gender as masquerade, an area which has a rich and continuing history within film theory. Her unacknowledged colleagues include Riviere (1929), Doane (1982, 1991), Heath (1986), Butler (*Bodies that Matter* [1993]),

Straayer (*Deviant Eyes* [1996]), and related work on, for instance, sexual difference (Foucault, *Herculine Barbin* [1980]), performativity (ed. Parker and Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance* [1995]), masculinity ("Male Trouble" issue, *Camera Obscura* [1988]), and feminist camp (Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures* [1996]). Given Studlar's previously demonstrated expertise and deftness with adapting psychoanalytic terminology to film, more commentary and engagement here would have been useful.

In addition, such historical wealth begs for a more complex and multi-perspectival approach. Studlar refuses to deal in an overt way with other related social constructs, such as race, class, or sexual orientation, yet they clearly form a major part of the "masculinities" that she analyzes. For instance, Barrymore's reputation as a "sissy" and a "mollycoddle" invites consideration of sexual orientation, and Fairbanks' normative masculinity insists on the superiority of middle-class whiteness, inviting consideration of race. Although Studlar repeatedly raises these issues in relation to her star analyses, she fails to address or even fully to recognize them as integral to her project.

Ultimately, Studlar is being disingenuous when she says she is not doing theory—it would be more accurate to say that she relegates theory to the endnotes. For instance, Studlar continues her dialogue with Miriam Hansen on Valentino and spectatorship, begun ten years ago (see Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification," *Cinema Journal* [1986]; *Babel and Babylon* [1991]; see Studlar's earlier version of this chapter; "Dialogue," *Cinema Journal* [1987]; "Discourses of Gender and Ethnicity," *Film Criticism* [1989]) in nine substantive footnotes across three chapters, and she similarly debates with Lary May in four long footnotes across two chapters. Since Studlar expands Hansen's claims that Valentino's star text specifically addresses female spectators, and since May discusses Fairbanks in terms of class, consumerism, and national identity, bringing these discussions into the body of the text would have been fruitful. The reader may find herself first reading the footnotes for the theoretical underpinnings and intrigue before going through the chapters proper. Studlar's rhetorical approach may have its merits—the book is more accessible to new students. However, we do not need another laymen's text on stars. What we could use is a text that communicates theoretically sophisticated concepts to an undergraduate audience, and, indeed, this reviewer would nominate Studlar for the job.

It is educational and delightful to read of the "boy culture" movement in the 1920s, which included the origin of the Boy Scouts, and of Teddy Roosevelt's concern that America's young people were growing up in a "slothful ease," along with detailed descriptions of Fairbanks' films, publicity, and popular press coverage; however, the synthesizing and arguing of the work usually performed by the author is left up to the reader. Thought-provoking yet opaque subheadings, such as "Patrician Peppiness and Red-Blooded Manliness," take the place of segues or causal links between the historical context and the star text analyses, and the reader must make the theoretical jump to the conclusion on her own to accept that Fairbanks modeled normative masculinity for a gender-troubled era.

Furthermore, if the reader accepts that "freak" shows, still popular in the early nineteenth century, offered a "pornographic" unveiling of a human mystery in Chaney, "America's greatest freak exhibit of the twentieth century," then the culmination of the book's thesis—that Chaney's grotesque performances constitute an anti-modern, masochistic, self-reflexive, and subversive revelation of the Other, which is the masquerade that is masculinity, thus negating the normative standard modeled by Fairbanks—seems rapidly concluded and coincidentally achieved, rather than causally argued. Having avoided unpacking her take on concepts related to masquerade thus far, to use this term in the final lines of her concluding chapter undermines the potential import of this work. It remains unclear why Chaney's "difference," which he exhibits throughout his star text, is a indeed a construction of gender; or why it is subversive; or if, indeed, these stars model four gendered constructions, why they do not more simply demonstrate multiple masculinities or even point beyond the binary categories of gender, rather than enact the hegemonic struggle of the normative pitted against the subversive. The reader is left wishing that Studlar had, instead of concluding with Chaney, begun with him and taken up, if only to revise, her valuable theoretical musings on masochism, gender difference, stardom, and spectatorship.

While Studlar's book certainly serves as a useful contribution to the continually growing wealth of scholarly studies on stars, spectatorship, and social constructions, it does so unfortunately to the exclusion of a more balanced and sustained consideration of the cultural history of the period in terms of race, class, sexuality, and nationality. As a collection of historical anecdote and textual analysis, Studlar's chapters are exemplary and should prove extremely useful to teachers and students of silent film and 1920s America. Hopefully, readers will not have to wait long for Studlar to expand on the achievements of *This Mad Masquerade*.

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Vision Machines

Cinema, Literature, and Sexuality in Spain and Cuba, 1983-1993

By Paul Julian Smith. London: Verso, 1996. $59.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

The six studies grouped under the title *Vision Machines* offer, in the author's own words, not a history of a recent decade of cultural production in Spain and Cuba but a "series of case studies: analyses of particular texts in so far as they relate to visibility, sexuality and nationality" (ix). The aim is no less ambitious for that disclaimer. Pairing the work of Continental cultural theorists Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, and Gianni Vattimo with the films, art works, and writings of Spaniards Pedro Almodóvar, Pepe Espaliú, and Julio Medem, and Cubans Nestor Almendros, Reinaldo Arenas, and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Smith generates a stimulating dialogue that would generate a kind of pan-Latin theory of postmodern practices and identities. Clearly the stakes are high: How is one (artist or critic) to speak of self and other in the age of AIDS, transnational media empires, and (especially, although differently, relevant to Spain and Cuba) post-Marxism?

Part One, devoted to Almodóvar's women, takes Smith into territory familiar to readers of his previous work on the Spanish director. The first chapter proposes a partial rereading of Almodóvar's 1983 film *Entre tinieblas/Dark Habits* (1983) as a rewriting of Federico García Lorca's last play, his "all women . . . allegory of the nation," *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936). Despite interesting insights via Teresa de Lauretis into the parallels between Lorca and Almodóvar as homosexual male authors who project their sexuality onto female characters, this analysis represents the weak link in the book. Smith's investigation of the varied ideological projections of the maternal in Spanish cinema overlooks Marsha Kinder's extensive work on the national specificity of the oedipal theme in Spanish film, literature, and the visual arts. The chapter also reflects Smith's untheorized auteurism, which informs his treatment of both Cuban and Spanish cinemas. In celebrating Almodóvar's achievements in *Entre tinieblas*, Smith pairs the director with his revered precursor Lorca in contrasting the film with Mario Camus's pedestrian 1987 adaptation of *Bernarda Alba*. For Smith, Camus's film offers a representative example of a presumed "official cinema" sponsored by the then Socialist Spanish government against which truly innovative Spanish directors must struggle.

In his analysis of *Kika* (1993), Almodóvar's dystopic exploration of the ravages of a monstrous media apparatus run rampant over individuals, society, and filmmakers alike, Smith finds a lucid if sometimes contradictory inscription of Paul Virilio's critique of contemporary technological society. (Smith's title is borrowed from Virilio's book.) By this interpretation, *Kika* offers a virtual catalogue of Virilian symptoms: the passage from vision to visualization; the disappearance of visual subjectivity in depersonalized spectacle; the exhaustion of the arts of film and photography in the face of a video apparatus simultaneous with reality, with the resultant loss of history, memory, and community. Smith is further concerned to examine the way Almodóvar's film takes Virilio's apocalyptic diagnosis into the realm of gender. Thus he explores its "technologizing of gender," again with reference to de Lauretis, in the opposition between the protagonist Kika—in his rendering the embodiment of text—and the image-dominant and dominating antagonist Andrea Caracortada. Kika falls victim not only to rape (in a scene that has aroused contrary spectatorial and critical passions) but also to Andrea, in a Jean Paul Gaultier leather biker suit that transforms her body into a cyborg-like camera/lighting apparatus, designed to capture material for her reality-TV program, "The Worst of the Day." Drawing on Donna Haraway's work on cyborgs, Smith suggests an avenue for moving beyond the "technological pessimism" of Virilio through the liberating possibilities held out by the character of Andrea.

The central section of the book moves to Cuban cinema and literature, specifically to "Cuban Homosexualities," and to questioning First World (at least Anglo-American) readings of gay identities—their visibility—in Cuba and in exile. Chapter 3 focuses on the divergent self-representations of the late cinematographer Nestor Almendros and writer Reinaldo Arenas in their published autobiographies and most pointedly in *Improper Conduct*, the 1984 documentary which Almendros codirected and in which Arenas is interviewed. Despite the undeniably elegiac tone of the chapter (both Almendros and Arenas died of the effects of AIDS), Smith is aggressive in his pursuit of what he identifies as the willful blindness and hypocrisy of the Anglo-American left critical establishment in their generally negative reception of the film. Although the criticisms he cites are cloaked in the language of the post-structuralist critique of representation—the essay quotes Michael Chanan on the film's supposed "disregard for dialectical argument, [lack of] exploration of the contradictions [the interviews] pose, or respect for the viewer's powers of discrimination" (64)—Smith locates their real source in an unquestioning leftist orthodoxy of Castro-philia. Reading the film in tandem with Almendros's professional autobiography, *Man with a Camera*, Smith refutes the film's supposed pretension to an artless, unmediated truth (the claim of its critics). And yet he points to the compelling reality of *Improper Conduct*'s interviews, employing the word

"testimony," with its powerful connotation, especially in Latin America, of political denunciation effected from the margin against the center. Smith is both provocative and eloquent in probing the paradoxes inherent in the polemic unleashed by the film, asking, "How can we reconcile the skepticism toward artistic truth, so commonplace in cultural studies since the seventies, with the respect due to the testimony of survivors of state terror? Or to put it more bluntly, how did the critique of representation become an apology for dictatorship?" (60)

Smith himself, in Chapter 4, is duly skeptical of the international commercial success of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's next to final film, *Fresa y chocolate/Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993), finding it an example of foreign audiences' search for exotic but safe pleasures in gay sexuality through a form of "cultural tourism." Is there some connection, he asks, between the film's "unprecedented subject matter . . . and unusual timidity of its mode of representation"? (82) It would seem that this disjunction is reproduced in what Smith deems the film's unrealizable goal: "to incorporate or assimilate same-sex eroticism into the nationalist project of the Revolution, from which it had once been so ostentatiously excluded" (81). Thus, for Smith, the film's aesthetic failings figure its political ones. Drawing upon the writings of the late gay French film critic Serge Daney (which he contrasts, favorably, with Alea's own classic essay "The Viewer's Dialectic"), Smith criticizes the film's demonstrative style coupled with its illusionistic promise of "simulated depth (of mise-en-scène, of characterization)" (86). This conjunction of style and story line reveals homosexuality as a mere pretext for the straight character David's coming-of-age trajectory. As viewers of *Strawberry* can confirm, the gaze is consistently gendered as male, and the woman and gay male occupy interchangeable positions—this, Smith notes, in contrast to Senel Paz's original story. Finally, the gay character Diego's homosexuality masks the reality of his political dissidence, the effective cause of his banishment into exile at the end of the film.

In the final section of the book, Smith returns to Spain through two diverse topics, Spanish representations of AIDS in Chapter 5 and a study of Julio Medem's 1993 film, *La ardilla roja/The Red Squirrel*. In "Fatal Strategies: The Representation of Aids in the Spanish State," Smith's own role as cultural mediator or translator between Latin/Hispanic cultures and especially Latin homosexuality and Anglo-American readers and viewers, implicit in the chapters on Cuba, becomes more evident. Smith addresses the apparent invisibility of the epidemic, of gays, gay men, and people with AIDS in Spain, but also their unreadability for a British and U.S. audience. Although he offers social and geopolitical explanations for the apparent passivity, lack of solidarity, and/or lack of direct political action that characterize Spanish responses to the virus, his principle focus is what might be called the poetics of AIDS. Smith makes use of Baudrillard's notion of "fatal strategies" in his attempt to make the Spanish "face" of AIDS intelligible to his readers. Although justified by the fact that the three cultural figures (writers Alberto Cardín and Eduardo Haro Ibars, and conceptual artist and sculptor Pepe Espaliú, all of whom died of AIDS in the 90s) whose work he studies, as well as their few Spanish exegetes, were themselves influenced by French critical theory, this approach carries certain risks. Transferred to a Spanish context, Baudrillard's celebratory nihilism, cultivation of excess, and aesthetization of death threaten to replicate and reinforce classic stereotypes of Spanish difference in an exaltation of blood, passion, and fatalism. Nonetheless, Smith mostly obviates the dangers of a potentially essentializing interpretation, finally proposing to use Spanish art to reread North American AIDS activism, with the recognition that neither is as metaphoric and indirect, or as political and pragmatic, as it seems.

The book's final chapter moves to reconsider the theme of the postmodern in Spanish cinema, this time countering Virilio's Gallic pessimism with the Mediterranean optimism of Gianni Vattimo. For Vattimo, the outcome of a technologized, media-dominated dream of a "transparent society" is not totalitarian surveillance, but opacity, a liberating chaos that leaves ample room for the pursuit of little freedoms and local pleasures. Indeed, it is in Spain that Vattimo encounters a model of this type of anti-rational, southern, postmodern society. For his part, Smith reads Medem's visually inventive thriller as an example of the theorist's "weak thought," particularly with regard to the film's unemphatic treatment of issues of gender and national—Basque—identity. As with his work on Almodóvar, Smith once again finds himself in the position of explaining and defending a filmmaker to presumably short-sighted national critics.

One final note. While Smith's challenge to political and critical orthodoxies in the name of an ethically, and personally, engaged criticism is certainly to be admired, his generalizations regarding the cultural politics of the government-sponsored film industries of Spain and Cuba (a problematic linkage in itself) demand revision. Indeed, Smith's characterization of the Spanish film industry under the Socialists plays into to the hands of the new Conservative government in Spain, anticipating similar comments made to *Le Monde* in August 1996 by Culture Secretary Miguel Angel Cortés.

■ Kathleen M. Vernon teaches at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

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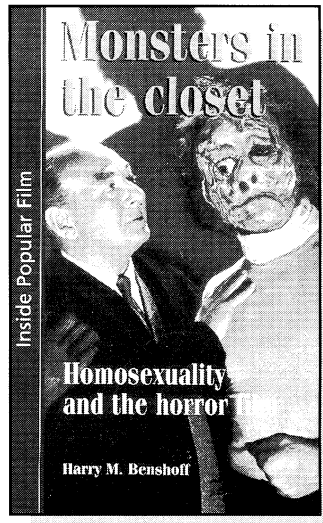

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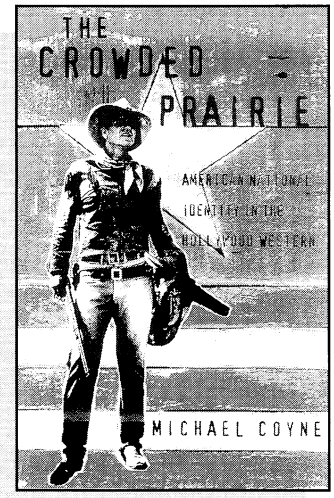

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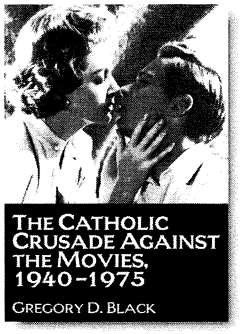

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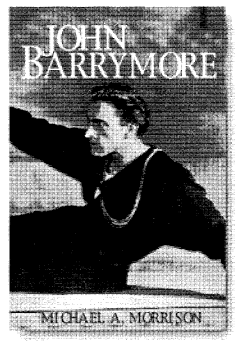

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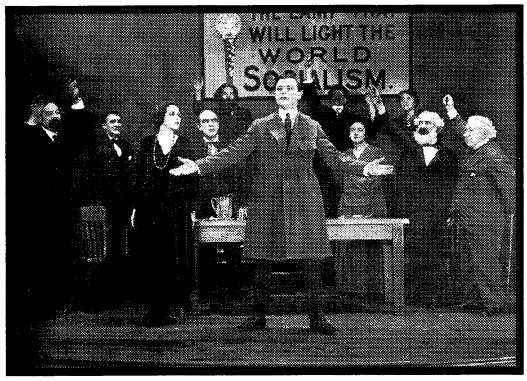

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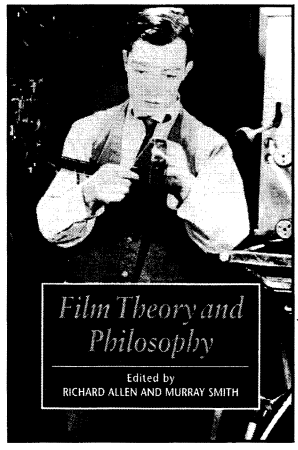

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